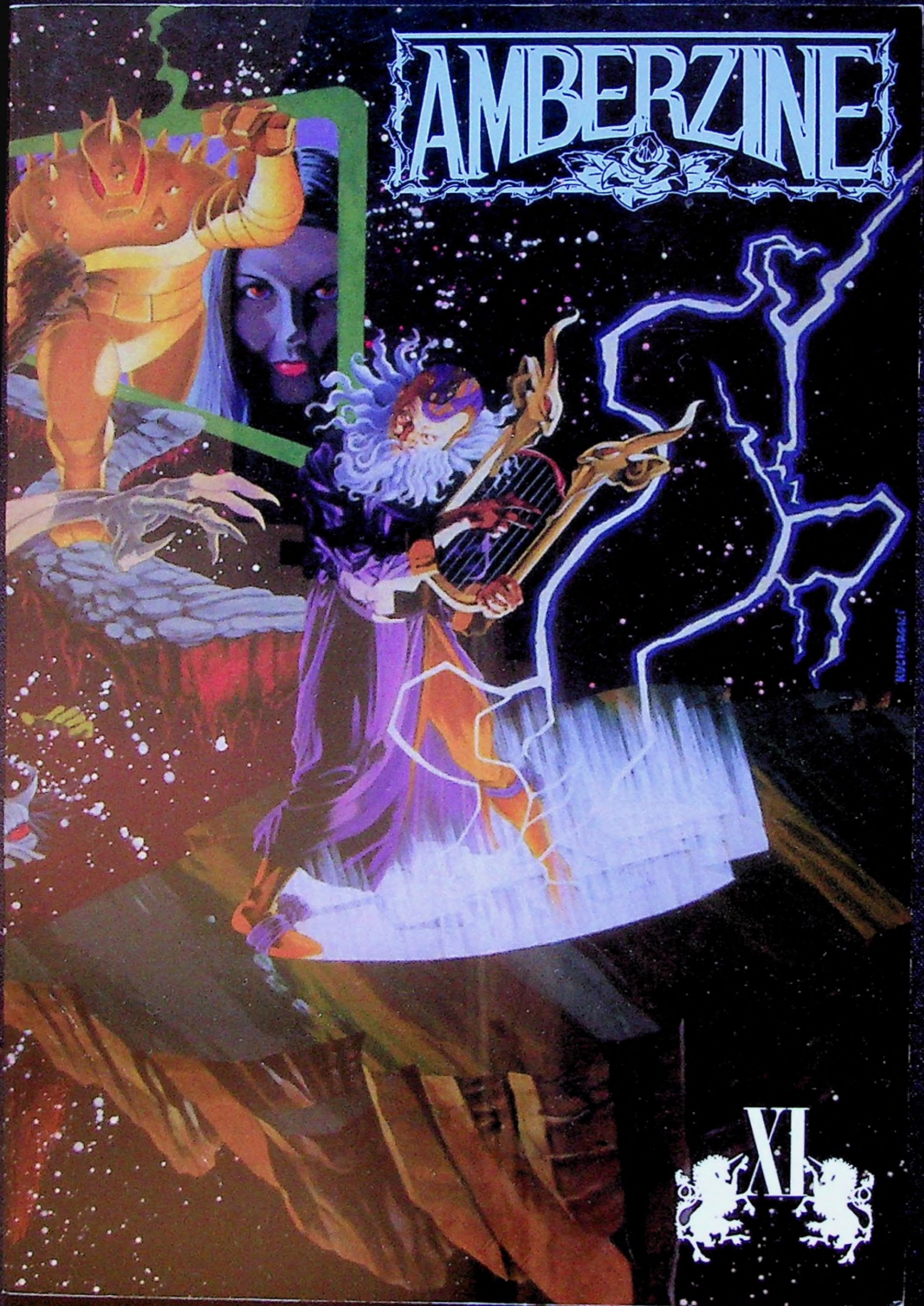


AMBERZINE



XI

Garbed in Black...
Moving in silence...
Arriving too soon...
I am DEATH

Or at least the harbinger of the death of almost every magazine I have done artwork for... *Aberations*, *Advantage*, *Amaranth*, *Amazing Experiences*, *Deathrealm*, *Eildon Tree*, *ERB World*, *Expanse*, *Fantasy Chronicles*, *Gauntlet*, *Heroworld*, *Living Trends*, *Marian Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine*, *Media 5*, *Midnight Zoo*, *Outworld*, *Pandora*, *Points*, and *Prisoners of the Night*... it gets kind of depressing. There are perhaps three exceptions... *Christian Alert*, *Cobblestone* and *Amberzine*.

Amber as Corwin reflected holds a special place in the heart, in my heart for a number of reasons, for a number of memories... July 1965 "Scotty" brought home the issue of *Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* which contained the first installment of Zelazny's *Call Me Conrad*; meeting Roger Zelazny for the first time in 1967 at the Detroit Triple Fan Fair; Terry Austin, Joe Wesson, Chris Hoth, Ken Steacy and I arguing over the direction of the next Amber novel would take, into the wee hours one evening at the 1973 World Science Fiction Convention in Toronto after *hearing* *Galaxy* magazine would be running a serialization of *The Sign of the Unicorn*; discussing Amber character and costume design with Kevin Siembieda while shopping for art supplies; discussing my Amber DRPG artwork with Roger over breakfast in Georgia at the 1991 World Fantasy Convention to name a few.

I could not stand by and allow *Amberzine* to come to be counted amongst the fallen, and so I asked if I might edit an issue in an effort to keep the magazine alive. I thank Erick Wujick for allowing me to attempt the task, and Jennifer Woelke who has been much more than a contributor, more than a coeditor, a good and true friend. Finally I dedicate this issue to my mother, Frances "Scotty" Kucharski; thank you for opening the world of words and images to me, everything from **Z** to **A**.

Michael
Kucharski

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by MICHAEL KUCHARSKI

Design by Lightning, and Lyre (Amberzine 11 cover)

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Fiona, Trump Mistress (see page 60)

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FANTASY
ART PRINTS
by WENDI
STRANG-FROST



"There was a thunder near at hand..."
from Strang-Frost Productions

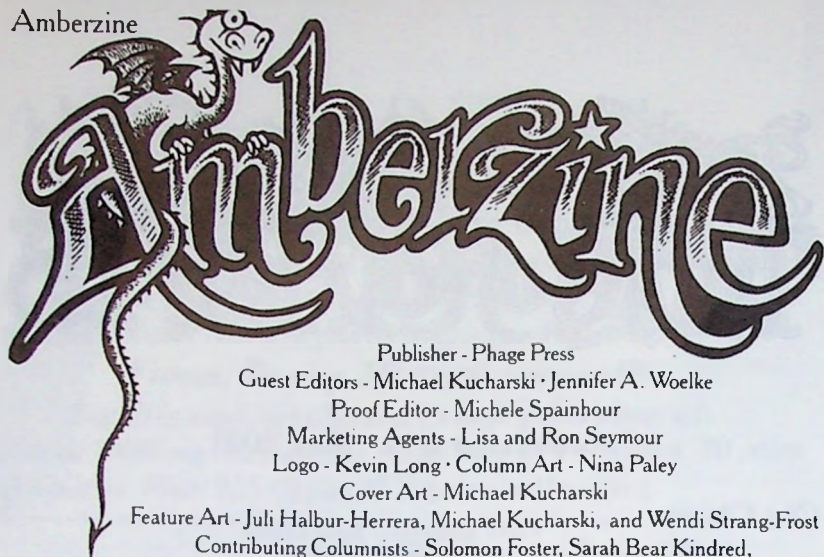
Visit Wendi Strang-Frost's gallery at:
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Images, pricing & other information.



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Old Ghosts

by Solomon Foster and Leslie Lightfoot

In Sarah Bear Kindred's To Reign In Hell Play-by-E-mail campaign, many of the younger Amberites have strong ties to Benedict's Avalon-Martin, of course, Benedict's young protege Faris, and his three fierce daughters, Victoria, Valerie, and Vivian. This bit of back-story explores that setting. It was completely played out, with each of us Game Mastering the other's character. Faris was played by Sol, Vivian by Leslie, and Benedict by Sarah.

Wind whipped through dried leaves. Gnarled old branches creaked. The dark forest triggered ancient instincts, fears of things unnatural and dauntingly malevolent.

In the heart of Lord Protector Benedict's lands, such fears would be baseless. Years of hard work had cleared the area, made it safe to walk a dark path on a moonless night.

But this camp was far from that heart. On the borders, things were not so cut and dried, and every odd noise could be something dreadful. The watch would catch glimpses from the corner of their eyes, but see nothing when they turned for a better look. They argued quietly among themselves over what, exactly, should be worrying them the most. The banshees and night terrors of the forest? Or the reason for the expedition, the enemy forces just a few hours' march ahead? The dark unknown, or the army which had already laid waste to a half-dozen villages?

There was one reason the guards were not already a bundle of raw nerves. Music rolled from their captain's tent, a solo cello playing simple

variations on a local folk dance tune. The touch was not masterful, the notes far from letter perfect. But it was comfortingly familiar. Their captain had been playing in camp for years now, through a dozen successful campaigns. It reassured them.

Tonight there was something more to it. The tone was richer than normal. It spoke of a forest, yes, but a warm one; bright sunlight streaming through rich green leaves; old wood, straight, proud, and well-aged. In almost subliminal ways, it comforted and calmed.

Faris was an experienced leader, but the effects of her music on her men were not foremost in her mind. She was showing off her new instrument to her cousin Vivian.

The light of the hanging lantern glinted off of Faris's fair, reddish hair, dancing there like the cello's sparkling high notes. Fiona's daughter had her mother's green eyes, elfin charm, and slight stature. Her movements were strong and sure, her form graceful and ordered.

Benedict's daughter was quite a contrast, a gangling collection of nervous energy. The tall, ebon-skinned young woman sprawled bonelessly on the tent's floor. Despite her attempts at maintaining a uniform, Vivian's attire still showed her Tambudze origins, as did the circle of ritual scars around one cheek.

Faris finished with a long, low, resonant note, which hung in the tent's air even after she lifted the bow from the strings.

Vivian's golden eyes shown in the lantern light. Her dark head cocked, almost as if she tested that last note's weight. She gave the satisfied nod of a craftsman admiring a job well done. "Nice, Faris. Very nice." Mischievous teeth flashed. "Still think it would have made a better drum, though."

Faris seemed a bit subdued, still caught up in the spell she had just woven. "Would you like one? There's still plenty of wood where that came from."

"Naw." Vivian waved a dismissive hand. "Thank you anyway. I'd just lose it."

Faris nodded absently.

Vivian looked at her fair cousin with quizzical and concerned eyes. "Faris? Where are you?"

"Out there."

"You're leaving." Her pointed teeth gnawed on her bottom lip for a moment. "How long do I - do we have, cousin?" The young woman's eyes met Faris's.

"Six months, a year? But I do need to get out and see the world." Faris grinned. "I think I will take you up on your walkabout idea, just for fun. Then see what I can learn from the rest of the family."

The Tambudze jumped to her feet and began pacing. Her hands twitched, quickly gesturing along with some internal conversation. Her expression danced with the effort of thought. Then she pounced on her cousin.

"Okay. How does this grab you?" Vivian's bright eyes lit her face with excitement. "You and me. We sneak over to ol' Prince Rottengut's encampment tonight. Whip the guy out of his bed. And tie him to the top of the tallest tree we can find. If that don't convince him to back off, then we massacre his army. I don't want to waste any more time messing with this guy."

Faris considered. "If we pull it off - we resolve the issue with no losses on our side, and at worst minor losses on theirs. I like it."

Vivian raced on. "Then we talk to Busima. Clear up whatever we can..." - her hands clapped and shot off into the air - "and we're gone."

"You think Benedict will let you go that easily? You're barely to the halfway point in your training."

"Hah! Busima's a pushover - on some things. And we can always claim you're training me as we go. Mom's a bigger worry."

"She's safely in Tambudze, with your sisters. Let Vic and Val worry about her reaction; we'll steer clear."

Vivian raced on, completely caught up with the idea. "First stop...." - grin - "Uncle Random. He's the youngest, probably the least dangerous, of them. And Faris" - excitement tinged with reverence - "I've heard the guy flies. I've never done that. Wouldn't it be great to try?"

Vivian continued to pace. "Of course, we couldn't tell him about Martin. You know how he hates to talk about his Dad. But I figure, hey. What Martin doesn't know, right? Whaddya think?"

"We know the son, let's check out the father." Faris checked to

make sure her cousin wasn't kidding. "He flies?"

Vivian shrugged off-handedly. "Gliders of some sort, I think. Or maybe really big kites. I'm not sure. Heard about it when I was doing my Debutante Circle." She stuck her pink tongue out at the memory and made little gagging noises.

"So, we leave Karl in charge of the camp while we go clean Prince Rutgart's clock?"

Faris nodded. "He's responsible. Has a good head on his shoulders."

"Works for me." She strode back across the tent and snatched up her spears. An enormous grin was spread across her face when she jaunted back to Faris. "Let's go, cousin."

The tall young woman strode through the held tent flap, filling her lungs as she went. When she emerged into the fall Avalon air, she let loose the infamous Zerget bellow. Her voice projected throughout the entire encampment, clear and enormous.

"Karl! Front and center!"

"Real subtle, Viv. I think they heard that the next county over."

White teeth flashed. "Good. Then I'm getting better at it."

Karl emerged from a nearby tent, trying to get his hair tidy as he hurried over. "Yes, Ma'ams?"

Faris said, "We're taking a walk. You're in charge until we get back. If we're not back by dawn, carry out the attack as we discussed this afternoon."

Karl snapped to attention. "Yes, ma'am!"

Vivian grinned. "And don't let 'em getcha in the night. C'mon, Faris." Carrying her spears easily at her side, the Tambudze loped toward the edge of the encampment with a long, ground-eating stride. Somehow she avoided tent lines, cooking fires, sleeping rolls and other ground hazards without ever apparently noticing they were there. Faris had seen her do it before, but still inarveled at it.

For nearly an hour, their only sounds were soft footfalls, Faris doing her best to match the skill of the hunter. Finally she said, "Okay. We're close to the river. They should be camped right on the other side. Why don't you climb one of the taller trees and have a look-see?"

A flash of teeth was all that was visible of the ebon warrior against

the dark pines. "Oook," Vivian whispered, followed by a muffled giggle. A rustle of wind and she was gone.

Faris stayed as still as she could, listening. For the longest time she heard nothing, then a single footstep.

"500 men, Faris," Vivian's whisper came from nowhere in particular. "Say 150 tents, mostly toward the water. Two picket lines, one either side of the camp - 40-50 horses each, no armor. Big tent on a rise. With standard." Her fierce white grin suddenly appeared in the darkness. "Four sentries by the water. Two on patrol, two stationary. Caught sight of three sentries in the forest, but I'm sure there's more. Faris, the sentries are alert and good. Rest of the camp's quiet, though."

"Are the sentries in the forest in a group? We ought to be able to take out two at a time silently, and if we move quickly, the alarm won't go up."

"Two together. One solo. His partner may have been taking a piss out of sight. But I didn't like their pattern. I think there's more. Either pairs or whatever." Vivian whispered eagerly, "So what you want to do?"

"Well, we shouldn't worry about what we don't know; never get anywhere doing that. And we can't leave those we do know about to obstruct us on the way out. Unless you have some notion of how we could sneak past everyone, or convince them we really should be taking their leader out with us?"

Vivian chewed on her lip with narrowed eyes, looked down at the ground, scratched her head, looked up at the night sky, and grinned over to her cousin. "Fare, I think I can get in without too much trouble. At least into the camp, probably into his tent. Think you could trump me out real quick, once I got him?"

"Oh yeah. If you can get in there on your lonesome, I can get you back out again."

Vivian grinned, then reached into a side pocket to pull out her Trump deck. She thumbed quickly through it, frowned, and thumbed again. "Shit! Faris, I don't have one of you!" She laughed in embarrassment.

Faris pulled her deck out of a pocket, and without looking, dealt Vivian a card off the bottom. "What did you do with the one I gave you two years ago?"

Vivian chewed on one lip. "Two years.... two years. Oh, yeah! I lent it to Vic. She needed two for some reason. I forgot to get it back. Thanks."

She gripped Faris's Trump securely between her lips. She returned her Trump deck to its pocket and gleefully stripped off her clothing. She moved with speed, efficiency, and absolutely no body shame. The warrior wrapped her shirt and pants into a tight bundle and slipped her two spears loosely through it.

Then she had a better thought. Removing the Trump from her mouth, she grinned at Faris. "You got a little bag or something, Faris? I mean, I can carry it like this. But it's kind of conspicuous."

Faris took a small bag off her belt, dumped its contents - a small knife and some wood blocks - into the bigger bag on her belt, and handed it over. "Will this do?"

"Yeah!" Vivian slid Faris's Trump into the bag, handed her cousin the bundle of clothing and spears, and bent over to put the bag down on the forest floor.

She did not stand up. Instead her long black arms and legs shortened. Her ebon torso sprouted short, mangy-looking, yellowish fur. She developed a stubby muzzle, upright pointed ears, and playfully wagging tail. Where the Tambudze warrior had crouched, there now stood a Zerget wild dog.

She definitely did not look like any of the Avalon breeds, but in the darkness, the profile was close enough, as was the panting laugh and lolling tongue. She frisked against Faris's knees.

"Good hunting," Faris said quietly.

Vivian yipped quietly and picked up the bag containing Faris's Trump in gentle teeth. Then, with a bound, she was off toward the river.

The dog trotted down the riverbank, away from the encampment of Prince Rutgart. She looked for a place where the river was wider and current slower, wild dogs not being particularly noted for their swimming ability.

About two hundred yards downstream, the river broadened, and its banks showed clear signs of having been once a ford. There were no recent

tracks at all, but there were two guards watching it from behind a rock at the edge of the forest.

Private property has always been a fuzzy concept for the Tambudze. Vivian set Faris's bag down and quietly scuffed it into the dirt, then chewed a few ragged holes into it, making it as unrecognizable as she could. Taking it back up again, she positioned herself carefully by the river.

With a startled yip for effect, she let herself fall into the river with a splash. The wild dog scrambled back to the near shore for a moment, but had difficulty negotiating it. She gave up and swam aimlessly around in the river, apparently a little lost, then spied the ford near the guards.

The miserable, wet, shivering creature, clutching its hard-fought prey in its mouth, eventually struggled out of the ford near the guards' position. The dog shook the water from its fur disgustedly, made a few insulting back digs with its rear paw, and trotted off toward the forest.

The guards chuckled at this. "Damn critter's addlepated."

"Not as much as us. We should be home in a warm bed, 'stead of on this wild goose chase with Rutgart."

Vivian trotted into the pine forest and took a tangential path toward the encampment. She moved quickly, confident that the men nearby had chased all the large predators from the area. But the bitch carefully avoided any sentries.

Halfway to the camp, Vivian took a moment to roll in a large dry pile of pine needles, adding to her mangy appearance and masking some of the odor of wet dog that clung to her fur.

Vivian approached the camp cautiously - eyes, ears and nose at the ready. She circled in the trees until she was at the point nearest the leader's tent. There she crouched in the underbrush, methodically scanning the area.

There were several mutts running around. Two guards stood alert in front of the tent; there were several more pairs of guards around the perimeter of the camp. In the tent an argument was going on; she couldn't make out the words.

She chose her spot with care, between the perimeter guards and away from the more dominant camp mutts. She skulked out of the forest and into the encampment. Keeping to the shadows, she nosed around the

bases of various tents. Several of the tents sounded wide awake inside, even at this late hour. It seemed some bizarrely elaborate preparations were being made.

With a sense of urgency, the dog began to make her way to the back of the command tent. Ostensibly just nosing around the perimeter, she kept keen ears up to see if she could catch the gist of the argument.

"...Sir, with those two present we will be forced to call on it more than would be prudent!"

"But we can defeat them."

"I imagine so. But at what cost?"

The question hung in the air without a response.

A quiet whine escaped Vivian's muzzle. Curiosity and concern gnawed at her insides. After one final check for watchers, she nosed at the bottom of the tent, looking for a place that a small bag and a small rodent might creep under the canvas. She found one just off the back right corner.

Off in the distance, a growl suggested one of the camp dogs had scented Viv's trail.

The bitch dropped the tattered bag holding Faris's Trump and nosed it under the canvas. She waited for a second for a reaction.

"What was that?"

"Your imagination, no doubt. This fear is unbecoming, old man."

That would have to do. Outlines blurred, and a small black shrew followed the bag into the "safety" of the tent, its bright rodent eyes taking in the scene.

She found herself under a cot, behind a small chest. She crept forward, and the tent's occupants came into view. Rutgart, tall and blond, was closer, his back to Viv. He had the look of a fanatic on the verge of seeing his dreams come true; anticipation informed his every motion. Still on the sunny side of forty, everything about him was immaculate, including his chain mail and sword.

Facing Viv from the tent entrance was Rutgart's debater, dressed and armed similarly, but older, shorter, and grayer. The grizzled veteran needed most of his self-control to remain silent.

Vivian inspected the underside of the cot, then squeaked to herself in agitation. If she returned to the warrior she was, the old man would be

able to see her and give alarm. Her little rodent mind raced... two men, chain mail.... an evil glint came into the shrew's black eyes. Small shrew teeth closed around the bag, and with some effort, shook the Trump loose. Vivian bit down on one corner. Then she rested to gather strength. Fixing the image of a creature in her mind, she ran her mental fingers through it. It wasn't a shape she had taken often, but it was one she knew.

A wailing moan coming from every direction filled the tent, quivering with foreboding and darkness.

"That's that," said Rutgart. "Too late for second thoughts now."

Once Vivian was gone, Faris headed for the river, in a course roughly parallel to Vivian's. She was alert, but moved with more quickness than caution, eager to position herself to see the fun.

The dark pines of Avalon thinned as Faris proceeded downriver. The terrain grew rocky, then hilly. Soon she moved between a series of low and eroded cliffs, fallen boulders, and loose stone. The riverbank was on her right, and by scrambling, she was able to keep out of sight of her cousin. The glow from the encampment's campfires was still visible.

The hair on the back of her forearms began to prickle. Having long ago learned to trust her instincts, Faris froze and listened very, very intently. From downriver, there was a wisp, a hint of carrion on the breeze. And a whisper?

As curious as the mongoose on her standard, Faris followed the sound. South of the ford, the cliff was carved and ribbed by the river's waters from ages past. In one of the cuts, the darkness of the night grew deeper, yet the shadows had more definition. Perhaps there was the slit of a cave mouth. Whispers and the scent of the newly dead emerged.

Faris's her foot brushed against something that snagged against her boot, then gave way with a quiet tearing sound. She looked down to see the tattered remains of a piece of cloth. On examination, it proved to be the shredded remains of a piece of a uniform, in Prince Rutgart's royal blue and white, stained with recently dried blood.

The redhead drew her staff and probed the darkness. The defile opened into a cave, the entrance tall and narrow. She could squeeze through

it, and perhaps a wolf could, but nothing larger.

This close, the scent of carrion was stronger. The whispers become voices, still too quiet to make out the words. Perhaps arguing? Perhaps not.

"Why so quiet?" Faris asked.

The voices murmured on, but one rose above the susurrus.

"Because it is rude to talk through doorways," For a moment, the voice was eerily recognizable. Then Faris was utterly certain it didn't sound like her mother.

"Feel free to step out," Faris said. She rehearsed the standard local methods of killing magical beasties.

"No." Not Benedict's voice. Succinct as always; but it wasn't him.

"Well, this is becoming just intolerable." Florimel definitely did not say. The whispering arguments in the background began to die down. "First that brutish army, now witches. What is a girl to do?"

"You've eaten, haven't you?" The not-Caine carried the prince's sardonic tone well.

Hoping none of the guards were close enough to hear her, Faris positioned herself so she was mostly hidden in the shadows near the cave. It was easy enough to get lost in their unnatural clinging heaviness. The raised hair on Faris's forearms gave way to goose bumps. "Witches?" she said. "Where?"

"Why? And who?" Not-Caine chuckled coldly.

"She is referring to you, eavesdropper." Her mother's voice again, so wrong and yet so familiar.

"Me, a witch? Would I have this rowan twig in my pocket if I were?"

"Please, join us." Fiona's invitation was cold and backed by a compulsion, tugging Faris toward the mouth of the cave.

But she'd had lots of experience ignoring her mother. Faris stood her ground, and with more confidence than she felt, jauntily replied, "Are you still hungry, then?"

"Honestly? Yes, I think I am a bit peckish." Florimel, so close, but not right.

A rush of wind burst forth from the cave mouth, carrying the fetid odor of the long dead and the freshly dead, scattering before it bits of cloth and cobwebs.



"Excuse you," Faris said.

"No!" Benedict's not-voice protested.

The sound of hooves echoed within the cavern. The carrion scent filled the air to choking levels. A black shape moved against the deepest shadows and oozed out through the small opening. Faris caught a quick impression of something not quite equine, carnivore's teeth, the gleaming spiral of a horn-like some deeper blackness of infinity within the swirling shadows. Though the crack was too narrow, the nightmare squeezed through regardless.

Faris backed off to give it room. "You should know I have silver, rowan, and the skill necessary to take you down. On the other hand, there are portable snacks a-plenty around here. If you should decide to take on those who are my enemies, I would be willing to let you live out the night."

"The night." Not Fiona's voice swirled in the wind around the nightmare, heavy with contempt.

"No bargain, one of the blood." The sinister hiss didn't really sound like Brand at all. "Once the night is past, you will act against us with the aid of the light."

The cruel click of sharp hooves on stone echoed. The wind picked up, bringing some relief from the cloying, fetid stench.

Faris positioned herself for a perfect throw. "True enough. But I might not survive the night for other reasons." A distant wailing moan started. "Like that. Or you might run; I am too preoccupied to give chase. Better a chance, than certain death."

At the sound of the wailing, the voices of the nightmare ceased their whispering for a moment. The shifting shape in the shadows suddenly reared back on two legs, red eyes blazing.

It reared toward the river, and Rutgart's encampment, almost dismissing Faris from its notice. A furious scream poured out of a blood red mouth, a clarion of hate that echoed off the walls of the river canyon.

A canine nose poked under the tent, following Vivian's trail. After a couple of sniffs it withdrew again, and let loose a ferocious peel of barks.

Alarmed, the two men looked Vivian's way. They were quite surprised to be see a rodent holding a playing card in its mouth.

Gathering air and mass to herself, Vivian shifted as rapidly as she could, to the monarch of the open plains-a she-elephant. As she expanded, she picked the cot up on her rapidly growing back, then pushed the rest of the tent's contents out of the way, finally snapping the tent's supports. When the dust cleared there was ruined tent around and above her, contents strewn any which way. Two very confused men lay under her tusks; and a small mutt yapped at her tail.

Vivian snatched Rutgart up in her trunk and shook him, violently. Medals flew from his chest, loose change from his pockets, and he looked rather discomfited. Then the moaning worked its way from her large and sensitive ears, through her thick skull, and into her attention. It came from a large circle of tents just ahead.

Trailing wreckage from the command tent behind her, she moved toward them as quickly as one of her bulk could, hoping surprise would keep the ballistas at bay for a while. She wasn't too careful about where she placed her feet - mutts, campfires and sleepers were their own responsibility.

A gigantic spectral form appeared above the moaning tents. It took a moment to properly register on the elephant's brain, but then it was obvious. She'd seen his card in the deck, and heard the local legends. She gazed on Corwin the Sorcerer King. And he was not happy to be disturbed. The moaning started to fade, but the night air was still on edge.

Two diamond hard forehooves crashed back to the ground with enough impact to fragment the stone. With a vast sucking sound, the shadows flirting around Faris retreated back into the center of the beast.

Clear-edged and sharp in the moonlight, the nightmare stood before her, a sinister black unicorn, feral, stinking of carrion and evil. Yet it still held the aloof beauty of the legendary beast of Amber.

Julian's clear blue gaze looked over at Faris and his not-voice spoke calmly and without emotion. "Put away your silver, daughter of the blood. Tonight another has offended my land-and the both of us. There will be no bargain. But if you would ride to the retribution, move swiftly."

With a flick of Faris's arm, the knife disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. "I hope you're not a kelpie in disguise." She vaulted onto the creature's back, which was slick, powerful, and oh-so-cold.

Fiona's other-voice chuckled. "Kelpies. Lovely on toast."

With another clarion challenge, the nightmare reared and sprang toward the ford. It was like riding a comet - incredibly fast, smooth and bone-chilling. The redhead had only an instant of warning as the nightmare reached the river. Steel muscles coiled, then flexed, and the two were suddenly airborne, sailing over the cool black water and reflected moonlight in a smooth meteoric arc. She could just make out the white faces of the sentries as they began to descend toward the far bank.

The nightmare touched down with a crash, cracking shale under its ebony hooves, though Faris felt no shock. They streaked into the forest, giving the frightened guards no time to react.

Pine boughs and blurred images of trees whipped by as the nightmare's course zigged. Either the creature was deranged, or it dodged traps that went by too quickly for the redhead to notice. The cold of the creature became even sharper, threatening Faris's joints.

In a few breathless moments, the two reached the outskirts of Rutgart's encampment. From the ford behind them, the sound of an alarm horn pierced the night.

If any elephant ever looked like it wanted to curse, it was this one. She rumbled to a stop, pachyderm eyes fixed on the specter. Vivian flapped her ears rapidly while she thought. Carefully she placed Rutgart on the ground - and under one enormous powerful foot. Vivian's delicate trunk reached into her mouth and pulled out the soggy Trump. One small eye fixed itself on the image.

"Faris? Faris, we got trouble here."

Her eye went back to the gigantic ghost. "Big bug-fuck trouble."

"So I see. Never fear, the calvary on the way."

The pseudo-Corwin's attention was rather unfocused - but an elephant making a trump contact caught it.

The elephant looked myopically at the specter over the camp.

Without breaking the contact, she popped the Trump back into her mouth.

"Hey! Stop slobbering on me!" Faris said through the link. "Damn, that thing is big."

Vivian's strong trunk picked Rutgart up again. She resumed her course toward the nearest of the softly moaning tents, trying to sidle as inconspicuously as an elephant being watched by a giant ghost could.

Not fooled for a moment, the specter drew its sword. Cold white flames surrounded the curved blade.

"Crap, crap, crap!" A pause. "Faris, some tents are moaning? The thing protects them!" The last was rushed out breathlessly as the elephant tried to dodge the spectral sword slice. But the Corwin's swing was deadly accurate, catching Viv's right ear and shoulder. The flaming blade passed through her as though she wasn't there. Hot steel would have hurt less than its deep, ancient power. She felt her body being wrested back to its natural form.

Their forward momentum unaffected, Rutgart and Vivian plowed into the creature's knee. Shockingly cold, it was spongier than flesh would have been, but still substantial. Something cracked, and the specter seemed slightly off-balance.

Vivian sprawled on the ground, spitting the Trump into her hand. Her already fuzzy contact with Faris cut off completely. She drew deep panting breaths and fought off an urge to scream. "Not good, not good!"

The crumpled form of Prince Rutgart attracted her attention - he had a sheathed long sword at his side. Vivian scrambled on all fours over to the prostrate figure and began tugging on the blade, all the while keeping an eye on the specter looming over her, and the ghost Grayswandir.

"Circle and take that thing from behind?" Faris suggested to the nightmare. "My partner is occupying its attention."

It growled under its breath, and nodded. Waves of hostility and anger poured from it, meshing with the chill.

Keeping within the shadows, the nightmare darted between trees. The sentries were numerous, but rather than guarding the camp, they stared slack-jawed at the specter in its center.

In a matter of heartbeats, redhead and nightmare circled the encampment and faced the ghost's back. The mare took the stance of a

jousting mount. Julian's not-voice whispered sardonically, "One pass. Then we part company."

Faris said, "A little to the left, please - a swing will work better than a poke." She hastily tied her rowan twig on the end of her staff, as the chill steel of the nightmare responded to her request.

With a breathtaking leap, they left the concealing shadows of the forest. Streamlined jumps cleared all obstacles and almost before Faris could blink back wind-whipped tears, they were at the colossus.

She barely had time to glance at Vivian, scrambling in human form around the Sorcerer King's feet, before her swing connected. The stroke was beautiful, textbook perfect, the velocity of the nightmare lending strength to the impact. There was a slight give, then the shock of the blow traveled up the length of the staff. More a mystical than a physical thing, it added to the chill that Faris was already experiencing. Then they were past.

With a gut-wrenching twist, the nightmare spun so it and its rider could see their handiwork. The Sorcerer King's mouth worked but no sound emerged. His ghostly blade rose to point at Faris and her mount, but with a pained expression, the colossus sank to one knee. Where the redhead had struck, shimmering sparks fountained in a glowing cascade, small against the immense form of Corwin.

"Go for the tents!" Faris yelled to Vivian. "See if taking out a few of the wizards causes the summoning to collapse!"

Vivian nodded wordlessly, finally working loose Rutgart's sword from its sheath. She exercised her specialty - running. The naked Tambudze, bare blade in hand, rushed hell-bent for the nearest tent.

To cover her, Faris made a leaping dismount and rolled for the Corwin. As she came out of the roll, she started showering the creature with lightning fast staff strikes. "Always wondered if my Uncle Corwin could keep up with me," she taunted.

Around them the camp was slowly recovering from its shock. Voices were raised - incoherent shouts of terror, mostly, cut with a few bellowed orders.

Vivian confronted a tent which, though nondescript to eye, was the source of a faint moaning. A guard held his position outside the entrance flap, but his attention was so distracted by the spectacle of Faris and the

Sorcerer King that he was oblivious to Vivian. She used her ebony skin and speed to their best advantage in the dark and confusing night. Rutgart's blade a bright flash of steel in her dark hands, she cut down the distracted guard.

Meanwhile, the Sorcerer King was fast, very fast. Though the specter was on one knee, still sparking from its earlier wound, the ghost Grayswandir intercepted all of Faris's strikes easily. A glimmer of triumph crept into the King's eyes.

An icy wind blew past the redhead, darkness flew around her, and the chilling not-voices of her aunts and uncles whispered through the air.

"Don't play with your opponent, boy." Benedict's voice dripped with contempt.

"Hah, no match even for a child." Eric, superior even in echo.

"Tsk, ts, ts, brother. I always hoped for better from you." Fiona.

Bleys's wild laugh twined with Brand's dark one.

And uncertainty came into the eye of the specter.

"You're not Corwin, you know," Faris said. "You're a ghost, of a long dead shadow, of someone who has been missing longer than I have been alive. Less than nothing in the grand scheme of things." She pressed her attack. Around her, the voices of the nightmare grew stronger, whispering taunts and picking away at the specter.

Under both attacks, Corwin faltered a little, and had difficulty regaining his feet. A few of Faris's blows got through his defense, but they merely bounced off the spongy flesh of the specter without the effects of her first blow.

And then Corwin got through her guard with a skillful feint, skimming the ghost blade down the outside of her right thigh. Something exploded in a pouch on her hip. Cold stabbed through her side, and for a moment she was sure her heart was going to stop. She staggered back, on the verge of falling, no longer feeling her right leg. She caught herself with her staff, using it as a walking stick to turn the fall into a step back.

"Nice sword," she spat, preparing herself for an onslaught.

The Sorcerer King's eyes regained their glint of triumph and Grayswandir rose to rain a fusillade of blows upon Faris.

From behind, steely black night overwhelmed her with a cold,

powerful force. She stumbled, fell, and found herself under the belly of the nightmare as it reared. The night was pierced once more by the nightmare's screamed equine challenge. Darkness oozed around Faris and the voices grew louder, shouting over themselves in an indiscernible melange of contempt, hate, and taunts.

Vivian roughly pushed her way into the tent, warm blood still dripping off her sword, which made her fit into the scene inside. Two people, one male, one female - perhaps a combined total of twenty-six summers between them, equally split - were suspended upside down from the ceiling. Tied back-to-back, their naked bodies were disturbingly pale, except for the traces of blood on their heads, dripping slowly from identical slashes on each neck, through their hair, into the cauldron below. It contained gallons of liquid, though how much was blood was hard to say-the warm air wafting from the bubbling fluid was shot through with other smells-mustard, sage, a bit of sulfur, and an odd scent that reminded Vivian of the local jewelers. The only light in the tent came from the glowing red coals.

To Vivian's right, staring into the fire, was a man in ceremonial robes of black on black. Indeed, he seemed to have painted all of his exposed skin black. His moaning faltered as he confusedly stared at Vivian, and she saw that even his teeth and the whites of his eyes were black.

With hardly a thought, Rutgart's longsword slashed out. Her arm backed by a warrior's disgust and desperation, she sliced through the sorcerer's chest. He died, a rather surprised look on his face.

In almost the same movement, Viv's callused foot struck out, kicking over the boiling cauldron and its contents. The fluid dissolved a few small knick-knacks on the floor before the packed earth underfoot greedily absorbed it.

Outside, armed men circled Faris, Corwin, and the nightmare, but they kept a good fifty yards back, obviously unsure what to make of the situation.

Grayswandir descended to meet the adamantine hooves and teeth of the nightmare. A grinding screech sailed up into the ultrasonic range, making Faris's short red hair stand on end and her eyes water. Sparks shot out into the night sky of the encampment, nearly blinding her.

Corwin and the nightmare both staggered back. Faris rolled to her

feet and vigorously renewed her attack, trying to press the advantage of Corwin's momentary disorientation. As she struck, an odd look of confusion crossed his face - as though a shackle he didn't know he was wearing had been lifted.

Corwin's tactics moved to purely defensive, attempting to keep Faris's rowan-tipped staff away. Off balance and again on one knee, the Sorcerer King was somewhat less than successful. Soon a number of smaller sparks around his shoulders and body marked Faris's scores.

A dawning look of comprehension, and growing intelligence, marked by a cruel light in his dark eyes, came over him. "Aaaalllllviivveee." His spectral screech made every hair in the camp rise on end. When the King spoke, the soldiers began to mutter among themselves. Old memories showed in their eyes. Some outward movement started around the edges of the encampment.

Vivian dodged past the hanging bodies, her bare feet avoiding both the fire and the rapidly diminishing spill, and went out through the hole in the back of the tent. Sword in one hand, Faris's Trump in the other, the Tambudze started toward the next tent she saw, fifteen feet beyond the first.

And instantly drew back her foot, hopping and cursing. The ground under her aborted step showed a still-fading spark of blue.

Vivian looked about wildly and then slowly took in the number and position of the other moaning tents - nine. So there were five tents in the inner ring, an additional five in the outer ring, ten altogether. The bloody tip of the sword sketched slightly in the air as Vivian thought. Then her eyes widened and she stopped suddenly.

"Faris?!? We got pentagram here!" Vivian's bellow was audible in the stunned silence following Corwin's outburst.

"Break it or complete it?" Faris yelled back. "Ummm - Am I in the center?"

The Spectral King took advantage of her distraction to stagger to his feet and back away. He took a guarded position, Grayswandir hung menacingly in the air above the woman and the creature of dreams. Cruel glints in his eyes matched his sparkling wounds.

Behind Faris, the nightmare also paused to regain its strength. Its voices were subdued, its cold less penetrating, and its shadows swirled more



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slowly.

A string of curses erupted from the Tambudze as she tested her footing. Sparks and shocks revealed every misstep. She shouted back her findings. "Yep. You're in the center. Your friends too." Another series of pops. "Crap! Looks one way. I'm stuck on the line."

"Damn, Faris. I'm going to have to break it. I already started." Vivian carefully placed her foot on a path that would lead her toward a different outlying tent - one that lay along the line toward the point of the pentagram.

"You hear that?" Faris said to the Corwin. "We're going to break the pentagram. You'll be free to go." Faris wasn't really sure in what sense, but she wanted to distract the specter.

A demonic gleam came into the specter's eyes. "Frrrrreeeeee." Its voice made her teeth ache. Something small and animal in the back of the redhead's mind wanted to find a corner and whimper. She wasn't alone - the crowd of men around the camp's outskirts was vanishing into the night.

Taking advantage of Corwin's distraction, Faris stepped closer to the nightmare. "You've got my mother's voice," she whispered. "Do you have some of her knowledge as well? Can we perform our own makeshift binding on this apparition?"

The nightmare shook its narrow, cruel head, making its black mane flow out into the night.

"Bindings. We don't need no stinking bindings." Random.

"I am not your mother, girl." Fiona's voice dripped with aloof contempt.

But Brand's voice, dark and twisted, cut in. "Bindings? Perhaps not. Might I suggest an unmaking? Blood for blood."

"Sure that won't just make it stronger?"

The nightmare reared.

"Freeing it will make it stronger." Benedict.

"Unmaking it will inconvenience it to death." Brand ended with a dark giggle.

The nightmare's hooves came down in the exact center of the pentagram. A metallic ringing echoed throughout the camp, completely different from the usual thunder crashes of the monster's hoof strikes.

"My blood?" Faris asked quietly.

The nightmare whickered, ugly and full of malicious humor. Metal glinted from beneath its prancing forehooves.

As Vivian carefully trod the path to the next tent, there was no snapping shock, but beneath her moving feet a blue line formed. The Tambudze shook her head and muttered. She had never been fond of the juju. She sped up and soon reached another softly moaning tent in the outer circle, one point of the pentacle.

The guards, confused, stepped back to let Vivian enter. As she passed, Vivian grinned at them with sharp, sharp teeth - not a friendly look at all.

The scene inside was much the same as the last tent. Her golden eyes darkened at the sight of the six-foot long dragon, drained of blood, hanging from the ceiling. She struck quickly at the black sorcerer, and gouts of red splashed out to paint the inside of the tent. Again came the thump of the kettle being overturned, followed by the nauseous odor of the spilled fluid.

Vivian sailed through the tent quickly and turned to follow the line of the pentagram, which took her to the standoff between Faris, nightmare and specter.

"Hey, Viv," said Faris, "don't know what you did, but you've confused it."

"Story of my life," the Tambudze muttered as she sped past.

To distract the Sorcerer King from whatever it had just uncovered, the nightmare neighed a clarion challenge and lunged at the specter. Ephemeral blade raised, Corwin rushed at the flowing black shape of Faris's advisor. The nightmare was fast, but even injured, the ghost was faster. Blade flashing, the specter drove the nightmare back from the center of the pentagram and toward one of the invisible walls that Vivian's feet traced. The Sorcerer King's attack was fierce and the nightmare's speed and shadows, its teeth, hooves, and horn of pain, were only partially successful at holding the specter at bay.

Grayswandir was a shimmering curtain of speed. Black shadows oozed from a dozen cuts on the nightmare, down its sides, making a roiling pool around its hooves. Its voices faltered back to whispers.

Even as it scored hits on the nightmare, the wounds on Corwin's form brightened. The light flowing from the injury at the back of his knees began to pulse and his ghostly image slowly shrank.

What attention the Corwin had seemed fully focussed on his opponent, and Faris took advantage of it. At the center of the pentagram, where the nightmare's hoof strike had torn up the turf, five glimmers of silver, arranged in a circle, shone through the dirt and dust of the conflict. She reached down, expecting to find knives. Instead, as she cleared away the debris, she realized that the points were the tips of a buried crown, once elegant, now blasted and blackened.

The redhead picked it up. It had a significant heft in her hand - steel, or perhaps something heavier. Where it was not scorched, the metal showed a delicately engraved pattern, uncomfortably familiar. The five tines of the crown rose to needle sharp points and the entire bottom was beveled to a slicing edge.

Meanwhile, the Tambudze warrior sped to the next tent. She was met at the tent's flap by a spear pointed outward. "Stop!" a deep, powerful voice commanded.

Menace rumbled in Vivian's alto, and hostility flashed in her golden eyes. "Sez who?" Rutgart's blade flashed to the side as Vivian swiped at the spearhead.

The counter with the spear was feeble. Her ebon hand snatched it away, disarming him effortlessly.

"One who knows more about what is going on than you do, as your reckless actions make evident."

For a moment, she juggled Trump, sword and spear before tossing Rutgart's sword offhandedly over her shoulder. She expertly reversed the spear to menace the voice's owner. "Ok, blackie. You got exactly five seconds to educate me. Then I decide that reckless works better. Go!"

"Pentagrams bind. With something like this, controlling what you've summoned is more work than the summoning. Unless your goal is to let the genie out of the bottle..."

"Yada, yada." Vivian waved the spearpoint with negligent menace. "Don't get all hoity-toity on me. You were gonna set that thing loose on me and my men. So, unless you have some real quick way of getting rid of it

now..." She grinned evilly. "I'm going to set it loose on you and your men. Fair 'nuff?"

"Disorder," he said without missing a beat. "It is the shade of an avatar of Order. If you would confront it directly, you need Disorder."

Outside, the nightmare slipped, and Corwin saw what it had been trying to hide. The sight of the crown in Faris's hands made his cruel eyes grow wide and he leapt for the young woman.

"So much for being able to sneak it on him without his noticing," Faris muttered. She ran away from the specter, poking one of the crown's tines into her left hand. It cut her easily, almost greedily. She was surprised by how much she bled. The traces of her blood left black runnels etched into the metal of the crown as the fluid was absorbed. The crown began to warm as an ancient power stirred.

The ghost Corwin howled loudly, a great cry echoing into the night sky, shaking the trees around the encampment. The remainder of Rutgart's forces fled.

In the tent, Vivian twisted her face in confusion. "Disorder?" She ducked her head as the cry of the Sorcerer King rent the air. She grimaced as the sounds ran down her spine like knives. *Crap!* I don't think you get any more disordered than me and my cousin. Speak clearly." The spearpoint darted forward to brush the man's Adam's apple.

"Then... you've... nothing to... worry about."

Vivian looked uncertain. She could almost hear her father's warning about advice from beaten opponents. But this was out of her league, way out. She growled, shook her head, and lowered the spear.

"Okay, then. Disorder. What's your plan?" Her voice was still menacing and suspicious as she watched Faris confront the ghost.

He reached behind his back, and pulled out a drawstring purse. "Coins. With his picture on them. Faces or swords, thousands of thousands of possibilities when shaken. Mix with ever-changing water."

There was a gleam of hunger in the phantom's eyes as it limped toward Faris. Corwin's ghostly hand reached out. "Miiiiinnnnneeee!" The voice was crypt-cold and demanding, with a hint of childish petulance. "Giiiiive."

By now the giant specter was merely very large. Faris got the

impression that the shrinking was a conscious decision of the ghost. Her eye fell on to the unmoving figure of Rutgart, laying on the ground. She promptly crowned him, then stepped back.

"Noooooooooo..." the specter rumbled. "Noooooot y.... MIIIIiiiiinnnnne!"

Rutgart stirred a little under Faris's movement and looked up into her eyes, and then to the rapidly approaching, glowing and sparking figure of Corwin. His scream was shrill as he tried to crab-walk backward.

The Sorcerer King's attention remained fixed on the crown. With his large hand he grasped the Prince around the neck and gently lifted him clear of the ground. Rutgart struggled, red-faced and choking. The specter thrust the point of the ghostly Grayswandir into the earth and let go. The soil around the tip of the blade crackled and turned grey.

The specter's eyes glowed with satisfaction as his now-free hand removed the crown and placed it on his own head. Rutgart's wriggling stopped suddenly and he appeared frozen.

Vivian growled again, the sight of the ghost with the crown making her queasy. She reluctantly took the bag of coins.

"Water. Which I assume you just so conveniently got. A pot too, right?" Golden eyes filled with distrust turned on the blackened sorcerer. "How do I know this little idea of yours ain't just gonna bake me and my cousin, leaving you sole proprietor of a big angry ghost?"

He handed over a canteen. "A pot? No. Mix and throw it at him, hard. And don't waste any time."

As the specter proudly straightened up with its new burden, Faris struck from behind with her usual mongoose speed. With the considerable strength possessed by those of her family, she brought her staff down on the crown. Without even a glance to see the effects of her blow, she dove for the pommel of the ghost's sword.

Faris's blow was as true as her intent. The staff came crashing down on the crowned head of Corwin, striking the beveled edge of blackened crown with brutal force. A warped, wavering tone rang out from the staff mixing with a sickening thud as the crown was driven down over the specter's forehead and eyes. Corwin's scream of rage and pain filled the night.

Vivian winced again at the specter's cries. She snatched the canteen

out of the sorcerer's hand with desperate speed. Dropping spear and trump, Vivian's fierce hands broke the canteen in half. Gold coins cascaded from the bag into pools of water.

With a whispered word, remembered from lessons under green leaves in deep shadows, Vivian swirled the coins and water together. Brownian motion swirled Mandlebrot colors.

Faris's hand caught the pommel of the phantom Grayswandir. It was cold, biting, and nauseating in her hand, as though some ancient hungry power lay trapped therein. With a jerk and a gasp, she ripped the sword from the ground. In one smooth motion she swung it around almost a full circle, driving it point-first through Corwin's back.

Eyes stuck behind the crown, Corwin looked blindly down at the sword point sticking out of his stomach, a puzzled expression on his face. Faris let go of the sword, suddenly uncertain. The night leaned in toward the center of pentagram, expectant, anticipatory, and tension-filled.

A deep, primitive yell emerged from the Tambudze's throat as she hurled the coins and water at the ghostly figure of Corwin. Sparkling gold and glittering silver arced out to the center of the pentagram in a slow motion cascade of light, shape and color - kaleidoscopic, ever changing, hypnotic.

Glimmering shapes - spinning coin and reflective drop-hit the Sorcerer King, swirling around his now silent howl, echoing the shimmering wounds spattered across his body.

Faris picked up her staff and took two shaky steps back.

The spinning coins were suspended throughout the ghost's body. Like a series of firecrackers, they started exploding, torching gouts of steam from the specter. As the last one went off, the creature hung there, hollow. In the ensuing silence, the night bent inward, until it seemed like Corwin was at the bottom of an enormous hole in the nature of the world.

Then the vacuum collapsed. A sound like a reverse explosion sucked toward the diminishing ghost. An anticlimactic pop signaled the end of the Sorcerer King.

Just like that, the world flowed back to normal. A deathly hush hung in the night air.

Vivian looked around with wide golden eyes, seeing her cousin, on shaky legs; the kneeling, vacant-eyed, and drooling figure of Rutgart; the

dark pools on the ground where once a black creature of dreams lay; the abandoned camp; and the sorcerer at her side.

She opened her mouth to speak when BOOM!

Blue walls of flaring light leapt skyward from the pentagram, engulfing her in violent light. From the points and apices of the pentagram screams could be heard. The tents-and their few remaining occupants-burst into cobalt flame as they were torn skyward in vanishing shreds.

Too late, Vivian shielded her eyes from the light that surrounded her, bathing her, licking around her dark body, but not harming her. "Faris?" she called out, unable to see.

"And that will happen to anyone else who opposes Benedict," bellowed Faris, in her loudest, tough-as-nails-sergeant voice.

The streaming light of the pentagram flared once, as in response to Faris's declaration. The sense of power rushing heavenward was incredible. Then it slowed, tapering off as the light filtered up into the night sky and disappeared.

The camp around the two women was silent again. The occasional puff of wind stirred a vacant tent.

Vivian chuckled. And stepped forward off the line of the former pentagram. "Heh. That'll learn 'em."

The Tambudze looked around her feet. "Faris? I dropped your Trump. Is it around here?"

"Two feet to your right," Faris said in a more normal voice, sounding bone weary.

"You okay, Fare?" Vivian's bright eyes turned in Faris's general direction as she stepped to the right. Her voice held exhaustion, her grin showed exultation, but the lines of her body told the practiced eye that Vivian was worried about something.

"Nothing two or three weeks rest won't cure," Faris said quietly. Faris kicked at the remains of the Sorcerer King. There was nothing but dust and earth; the crown was gone.

She looked around for the nightmare. There was no figure of horse or sound of whispering. Even in the darkness - lit by the occasional burning wreckage - Faris could see pools of blackness on the ground, similar to what flowed from nightmare's sides as the phantom Grayswandir cut into it. They

rippled on the ground, moved by more than the night breezes, but placid.

Once she could hear Faris in motion, Vivian made a quick and quiet sweeping motion with one long leg to her right; dragging her foot lightly over an area of ground. On the second sweep her bare foot came in contact with the Trump. Swiftly, the Tambudze crouched and picked it up. She felt it gently and then attempted to wipe the elephant saliva, dirt, blood and what not off it.

"You know," Faris said casually but clearly, "I'm not sure how we're going to report this." She walked to where Rutgart lay, scanning the perimeter as she went. There were only a few stragglers of the opposing force remaining, nothing to worry about. The distant sounds of a ragged retreat through the forest could faintly be heard on the night wind.

"Heh." Vivian's chuckle was a little grim. "I'm thinking the sooner we clear out of here, the longer we can delay the 'report'. Busima had to've seen that last burst, even from Stronghold. He's probably on his way."

Vivian took a few steps vaguely toward Faris. Her stride was loose-kneed and somewhat awkward, not at all her normal pantherine stalk.

"Rutgart still breathing?" She said in a cold voice.

Faris studied him for several long moments. "Yes. Think he's learned his lesson?" Now that she was closer, Viv could hear Faris's teeth chatter.

"Hmph. Don't know. Don't care." Vivian zeroed in on the redhead's voice, and one carefully placed foot brushed lightly against Rutgart's sleeve. Quickly, Vivian pounced on the prostrate form of Rutgart, gathering his head and neck into spine-breaking grip.

"You sure you're okay?" Vivian's face turned toward Faris, concern for her cousin written on her features. The Tambudze's eyes were golden in the dark night. Extremely golden. Her pupils were so dilated they were invisible. "Faris?"

"I'm doing about as well as you are," Faris said, very quietly. "Let's deal with this bastard and get out of here."

The sound of Rutgart's vertebrae shredding was like muffled popcorn. Vivian held the new-made corpse for a moment, assuring herself that heartbeat and respiration were things of the past. A quick nod, and the Tambudze stood, dropping Rutgart's body like a discarded mouse.

Wide nostrils flared as she turned. "Kay. River's this way?" Vivian

took an uncertain step toward the water.

"Let me lean on you," Faris said, "and I'll point the way."

"Deal, cuz." Vivian chuckled ruefully. She stepped closer to the sound of Faris's chattering teeth. Vivian held out the Trump with a grimacing grin. "You got a pocket for this?"

Faris took it and made it disappear.

"Heh. Let me know if you want to trade my witty repartee for four feet and a fur coat." One dark eyebrow rose. "Think I can pull one more."

"Nah," Faris said. "I'm only cold where that damned sword touched me, and I don't think any amount of fur would help with that. Step carefully, here's the bridge."

"Bridge? There's a bridge?!?" Vivian's chuckle built to an out-and-out laugh. "God, I always gotta do things the hard way." As Vivian felt forward with one ebon foot, she held her arm out from her side-partially to balance, but more so that Faris would have something to lean on.

Shortly, they crouched overlooking their own encampment. A whispered conference and the two pushed down into a brambled gully. Quickly they reached the outskirts of the Avalonian forces. Relying on their abilities and their intimate knowledge of their own security, the two women penetrated the perimeter without mishap. A quick dash and they reached the canvas flaps of their command tent.

Vivian's teeth gleamed in the moonlight at their success. Faris reached out and lifted the tent flap.

A tall figure inside stirred as the silvery light fell into the interior of the tent, revealing hints of oranges and reds on his attire. Vivian's nostrils flared, her grin faded. "Crap!" she whispered under her breath.

"Come in," he said dryly. "You must be thirsty."

"Yes, please," Faris said, walking in calmly, trying not to let her injuries show, and trusting that Vivian could find her way without help.

Vivian grimaced but stepped firmly into the interior of the tent; the layout was as familiar as the back of her hand. She kept a careful ear out for the rustle of Benedict's and Faris's clothing. By just slightly exaggerating her usual 'guilty' behavior, her eyes darted everywhere around the tent, the

roof, her feet, to the side - anywhere but directly at her father. "Heya, Busima."

There was a clink as he set wineglasses on the table and filled them. "Interesting pyrotechnics," he said conversationally.

"I believe they ensured we won't have to worry about Rutgart's forces any time soon," Faris replied.

He raised an eyebrow at Vivian. "Any further explanation?"

Vivian paused. When Faris didn't answer, she toed the carpet sheepishly. "It was a real mess, Busima. But the job got done. Army's in rout. Rutgart's deceased. Ummm." She looked away. "Other bad things happened. But I think it's gonna be okay."

"Hmmm," Benedict said. "I don't suppose it occurs to you that you've also destroyed a forest, seriously upset the ecological and arcane balance of the area, poisoned the earth and the river, scared the peasants, and last but not least, completely removed any possibility that **we might learn where the hell our little shadow upstart Rutgart learned the arts of mages????**" His voice was modulated so that it would not carry beyond the walls of the tent, while peeling the skin off the pair's noses.

"And," he said, lighting a lantern and glancing from one to the other, "gotten both of yourselves injured." He looked as if he'd like to spit. "You're not drinking your wine, girls."

Vivian looked down at her feet, very much a chastised child. "Sorry, Busima," came out in a small voice. One golden eye peeked from under a brow. "You done yet, Dad?"

"As soon as you two finish reporting anything that might be pertinent. Any clues that Rutgart had outside help? Any further intelligence?" Seeing that they would not take them on their own, he handed each of them goblets. "Let's see what we can salvage, shall we? And then, both of you will report to the surgeon's pavilion."

He smiled at last. "Did either of you stop to consider what your mothers would do to me if you got seriously injured, or worse?" He put a genuinely humorous tone of apprehension into his question. "And, both of you, sit down before you fall down."

Faris sat. "Vivian got a closer look at the mages. The magic involved was wrapped up with our family. Shadows of it, had neither the subtlety nor

power of the real thing. Potent by local standards, though."

"Shadowmagic," Benedict said, sounding almost disappointed. "I wonder how much was window dressing. There were traces of what looked like true magecraft in the explosion."

"Busima..." Vivian stared blindly into the distance. "All that magecraft stuff is ... just beyond me. When you say there were traces in the explosion... what are you looking for? Give me some clue to weed out details or I'm going to be reporting all night."

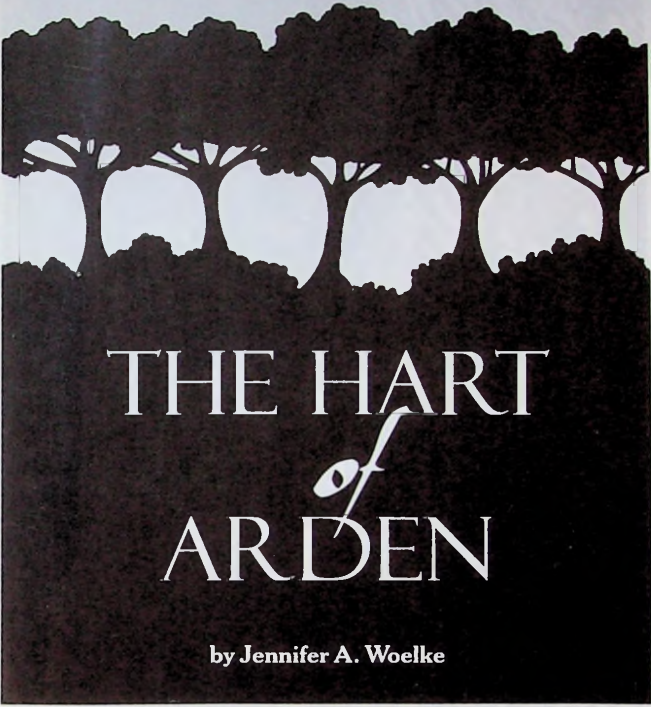
Vivian looked back in her father's general direction. Her brow was furrowed as she tried to figure out what he wanted from her.

"Let us just say that I have enough education to recognize the... signature... of true magics when I see them. Trying to describe them would be like trying to describe the flavor of vanilla...." He shook his head. "Whatever. You two are very lucky. And I'd like you both to see the surgeon at once. Anything else can wait until you're rested. Consider yourselves fortunate that I don't have to explain your deaths or maimings to your mothers." His sudden grin was like a cloud unveiling the sun. "I certainly consider myself so."

Solomon Foster is an avid amateur whistle player, haunting the local pub sessions, playing with friends, and studying the tunes and techniques of the masters. In his spare time he reads profusely, cooks, plays other (much larger) musical instruments, cross-country skis, plots with the notorious Michigan Amber cabal, writes silly stuff, and runs a small software company specializing in NURBS-based geometry translation libraries. He is currently looking for a house in Ann Arbor that can support a single guy, a black Lab or two, and frequent gatherings of musicians and gamers. He has been published previously in *Shadow Eclipse* and *The C/C++ Users Journal*.

Leslie Lightfoot has been RPGing for over 20 years with forays into the wilderness of PBeMing since autumn 1997. Other hobbies include SF&F - reading and writing, web design, and talking about herself in the third person. She's survived 38 years of the honorable combat known as life and is ecstatically shacking up with her husband of 14 years in Washington (the state), USA. She has a ten-year-old son destined to stamp Tokyo into the ground. And when not typing on the computer at home, she is typing on the computer at work as a servant of dark... make that a Sales Support Associate for the evil em... a large Insurance company. (sigh)

Wendi Strang-Frost is the artist behind Strang-Frost Productions, (www.sfpro.com). She's been dabbling in comic books for the last eight years and has worked for Millennium Publications, and most recently Warp Graphics, Inc. drawing the bi-monthly *WaveDancers* story in the *ElfQuest* anthology comic. She's currently working on self-publishing an original comic story with her writer husband, and does the odd illustration job on the side. Ed: You can find earlier examples of her work in *Amberzine* #7.



THE HART *of* ARDEN

by Jennifer A. Woelke

From Michael Kucharski's "Methuselah's Children" campaign. At the end of the Patternfall war, Corwin disappears into the Pattern he created. Merlin alone has access to this shadowworld.

Troubled times have found Amber. Random is dead and in his place a madman reigns, bent on the destruction of free will. Arden, besieged, stands alone in defiance of Reynard.



My patrol was interrupted by a strange sigh of wind. The night closed around the sound and became still. A few moments of concentration revealed that Julian was at the opposite stretch of the perimeter. He was busy, engaged in battle with some malevolent creature. Resigned, I went to investigate.

It was late in the night, dark and overcast. The wood in this quarter had been blasted recently with fire. The dank odor of old ashes rose up as I passed. Arden was a shattered husk of its former glory. After nearly thirty years of siege, the forest had a sense of enforced dormancy. The long tracts of once great, whispering woods were shrouded in brittle silence, broken only by the baying of hounds, and the dying of creatures.

I stopped near the forest edge. At first, I saw nothing. Then I heard someone call out plaintively. I shifted slightly closer to the wood's edge. A young man stood, holding a short staff, looking around bemusedly. He seemed to expect someone. I frowned. He was entirely too familiar somehow, yet I did not know him. The forest was absolutely silent. No bird song, no small game movement, not so much as a breeze stirred the dry leaves.

"You there," I called. I was pleased to see him jump. "What would you in these woods?"

Now he faced me, and I could see whom he resembled. He was surely of the line of Corwin. I had long been friends with Corwin's son Merlin. There was a strong resemblance: the same black hair, the same firm jaw line, a brighter green eye, a slighter build. He even smelled like Corwin. Through Merlin I knew that Corwin had engendered several children. He kept them locked away on his shadow, where none but Merlin could reach.

I allowed the boy a glimpse of glamour - a hint of green woods behind me, like fog - now a strong impression, now just a wisp of green. My form faded in and out as well, whippet-thin, all bone and tendon. My short fair hair blew about my ghost-pale face. My sharp glance, grey-eyed, changeable. I was garbed in nondescript, rag-like clothing, in colors of the late winter woods - taupe and mushroom, bone white and pale lichen. He got just a glimpse, and then I was again hidden...

"One of Corwin's brats I'll warrant. Or are you Merlin's get? Speak up now, what is your defense?"

His mouth opened briefly, snapped shut, then opened again. "I am the son of Corwin, although we are not on good terms. Who are you, and how do you know Corwin?"

I stepped forward, out of the concealing shadows, surprised to find myself angry after all this time. How dared this upstart show up now? His father had been the chosen for the crown of Amber. He walked away, and refused to return. He let Amber fall.

"Who I am is of no concern to you, bratling. Tell Corwin his time of opportunity has passed. Fool he is, he may not care. Tell him the center cannot hold, but no hawk ever flies free." I paused, seething. "Tell him that soon, he too, will eat the essence of dust - Tell him!"

I stepped back and faded entirely from his view, but remained, watching. I wanted to know how this one came here. His power was all latent, with no overlay of Logrus or Pattern. I could sense no back-trail through shadow, no trace of any power to bring him to this place. It was if he stepped out of a locked cell to appear here. This was a mystery. I sensed no ill intent from him; he was simply confused by his arrival in Arden.

High above us, Kiree, my eagle companion, called, turned a wheel in the sky, and headed back to base camp. The boy startled, at her scream, stared as she disappeared above the trees. He stood, gazing up at the silent forms of the ravaged forest. I waited to see his next move. He made up his mind, and stepped into the trees. I silently followed. He was jumpy, and seemed to subliminally sense my presence. At one point he rounded on my location, wielding his stick as if it were a sword. I gave him a point or two for form. He could not, of course, see or reach me, but I was suitably impressed by his accuracy. He called out "Who's there?" I quickly cast a dampening spell on the sound wave, lest it travel too far. Foolish boy. He did not yet know this was no larking walk about the park.

Perplexed and troubled, I searched my mind trying to find an answer to his sudden appearance. What was Corwin's kin doing here, with no guide, no Pattern, and no clue? I was suddenly alarmed by the sound of a low growl, nearby and closing. Damn! Of all the times to forget the presence of Julian's serpent-forsaken pups. This was a patrol of several dogs, and I sensed we were in the midst of their scattered formation.

As I concentrated on warning the dogs off, the boy changed his

direction and moved away from the dogs, back toward the forest edge. I let him go for the moment, while forming a sending to give the dogs to chase. Then the damn-fool-son-of-his-father decided to run. The dogs closed in eagerly around us. Instinctively, I formed a Logrus tendril and grabbed him, then dragged him up, high into the cover of the tree canopy. I snarled at the dogs. "This is my meat," I growled, knowing they would report my actions back to Julian. "I will take care of this."

My conjured sending, a white hart, flashed past, and the hounds obligingly gave chase, sounding as they went off around the forest edge. The boy and I were high above the forest floor, perched on the broad limb of a mature tree. I sat comfortably on a limb I could have stretched out and slept on. I turned to my captive. His appearance had changed - he seemed more drawn, almost withered, and his color faded even as I watched. I blinked, and realized part of what I was Seeing was the future. I was getting more disconcerted every moment. "Who was it sent you, child? Who would send you to your death?"

His chin came up. "Nobody sends me. I have walked my own path, with no preparation offered from any of my kinsfolk. I have attempted to initiate myself, and I am afraid I don't know where this place is."

I regarded him steadily. He did not realize how impossible this was. No one, and certainly not this unschooled child, could have left Corwin's sanctuary without assistance. I knew from discussion with Merlin that Corwin was not prepared to let his children out. He had locked them away from reality. From Arden. From Amber.

"You are in the real world, and it is perilous. It is doing you ill, for you are wasting away."

"Amber..." he said dazedly, "am I in Amber?" He looked at his hands, then back at me.

"You are in Forest Arden," I confirmed.

He looked back at his hands. "If I am in the real world, why is it harming me?"

I shook my head. "I do not know why it should harm you so. Your father locked you away. Why he let you leave his sanctuary, I know not." I continued to study him. There was something here I didn't understand, some piece of information I was missing. How could he leave Corwin's

Pattern Shadow without walking, and subsequently imprinting, Corwin's Pattern? A thought came forward - "Unless he cast you out. Yes, that would make the most sense." I fixed him with a withering stare. "I ask you again - who sent you here?"

He was insistent. "I came of my own free will, or at least I believe I did. My father would not cast me out, although he may have let me out." He frowned slightly, still studying his hands.

I sighed inwardly. He truly believed he was speaking truth, which was clear even without Sight. A thought or memory began to tease the hind part of my brain. There was an answer, and I should know that answer, but I was going to need time to reflect. His condition was precarious, but I was seeing the future in his wasted face, not the present. I glanced up at the clouded sky. It was lightening with the first, false dawn.

"There is no more time to this night. I must needs I will host you this day, and we will seek your return on the morrow eve..." I reached out my hand to take his, and discovered that I had shaped a wolf. I morphed the extended paw into something more monkey-like. When he took my hand, I stood, morphing to become more biped, and say, "Come, we walk the tree-paths now. Hold your tongue, and remain absolutely silent when I gesture so." I made a short, slicing movement of my arm. He swallowed, then nodded, and we went.

The high limb road took me where I wanted to go. I had a section of perimeter I intended to patrol before we encamped. Several miles later, we approached my camp. I reached for his hand again, and made the shift to the Glimmer-green. My glamourie. My green Arden memory.

Suddenly we were surrounded by all the missing sounds of the forest. A breeze whispered in the canopy, and birds made sleepy disturbed roosting noises. I breathed deep the clean morning air. My camp was ahead, a platform on the massive bough, supporting a modest tent. I escorted him into the tent, then returned outdoors to 'reach' for my spare bedroll and sleep-pad. I re-entered the tent, and handed him his bed. I then dug through a convenient haversack, 'reaching' to get journey cakes for supper. I handed him one, and motioned toward the water jug. He, in return, gave me a blank look.

"I thank you." he said, "I am not hungry at this moment in time, but I am sure my hunger will return." Thoughts flickered across his face. I hid my smile. He feared to eat the food of the Fae. How close he was to truth, he knew not. He seemed most uncertain when he looked at me. That was fine. He would need both distrust and uncertainty soon enough. Might as well cultivate them.

I ate my food, and drank a long draught. Then I rolled in for my rest. I slipped into the breathing pattern of sleep, and began thinking.

It was nigh on to noon when my mind found the memory I sought. The child that was Tam Lin once dreamt of traveling to a marvelous room, long and narrow, and full of mirrors. In the room was a funny little man, who took Tam's hand, and guided the child back to his home, far and away. The child woke from this dream, and mysteriously found himself locked on the outside of the nursery room. I remembered my shock very well, even after all the long years. It was a dream, and yet I had physically moved through space, to end up on the wrong side of the door.

That was a key to the current problem. I became convinced that I had but one path to take. I must reach Dworkin. Dworkin had returned me to my place, all those centuries ago. Surely he would have no problem returning this one to his proper home.

Dworkin was known to be oblivious to locks and wards. It was rumored that he could shape stone and walk through walls. He was quite mad, in a benevolent sort of way. I firmly believed that he could shape wind, if he wanted to. He had taken himself out of Castle Amber, and into Tir-na Nog'th - which made him damnably difficult to visit. I sighed and rewarded myself, for the moment, with sleep.



I awoke several hours later. While the boy slept all was quiet. I let him sleep long, thinking that sleep was the best way to conserve his energy, and woke him in late afternoon. After showing him the tree I had adapted as a washroom, I again offered food and drink; he again declined. As was her custom, Kiree, the harpy eagle, visited me for her meal. I searched the shadow paths, 'reaching,' and after a few moments produced what might be taken for a large rabbit. With a casual flick of the wrist, I snapped the creature's neck and lobbed it out of the tree. The eagle screamed and dove for the meat, then carried it off to another tree to eat. I then studied my guest.

He had watched me with much interest. He still had not eaten, and was pale and tired looking. He returned my gaze, and asked my name.

I morphed back into the semblance he first glimpsed. "You may call me Tamlin. I am one of the guardians of Arden, although few know of me. You are one of few, sapling. And how shall I call you?"

Before he could answer, I felt a trump contact forming. It was inside my defenses before I could ward. I recognized Dworkin, "*Aoife, a human, or rather an Amberite, a son of Corwin is loose in the world. Alexander is in danger, possibly dying. As he is invisible to me, I am sending the spirit of his brother Henry to fetch him to me. But that may not be quick enough - Henry has less than three hours to find him. I need your help.*"

I replied, "*I have him here, I found him woods-walking. I was coming to you as soon as the moon shows up. Can we make it to you sooner?*" I readied a tendril to grab the boy, if necessary.

Dworkin replied, "*Oh, excellent. How do you plan to do so?*"

This set me back a bit. I assumed that Dworkin existed somewhere in real time when Tir-na Nog'th was invisible - so I expected a trump contact to put the three of us in the same spatial context. But instead Dworkin was asking me how to do something - very disconcerting.

Dworkin's voice continued, "*After Dworkin was made aware of Alexander's problem, I began working on it. I have given, or is it will be giving, Henry a talisman to draw Henry to Alexander. It is Dworkin's intention to get him brought here. By possession if necessary. He has somehow done a thing only the most advanced shapeshifter might try, very foolish of him. I can't honestly remember anyone doing it - but in theory it can be done,*

or rather it has been done, but by a non-shapeshifter... how strange. Have you even tried this - - not that Dworkin is recommending that you do?"

"Dworkin?" I replied, "Dworkin, who is with you today?" I was somewhat alarmed. Dworkin had many eccentricities, but that mode of speech was not usually one of them. When he failed to answer, I continued, "Dworkin, I can bring Alex, no possession will be necessary. What is this thing he has done? How did he get here, when we both know that Corwin has not released his brood?" I paused, then ventured, "Can I come through to where you are?" I looked at the long afternoon shadows. "Or should I wait and come in the usual way?"

Dworkin replied, "Even you, sweet child, can only get here by walking and that is dangerous enough, for walk you must. Rebma, Amber and he are all too close to Mt. Kolvir to display one's self in public. Dworkin believes that the worst things always seem to happen by accident with the best of intentions. Everyone. Everyone is with me. Dworkin is alone, no that is not true Henry was here, but now Henry is gone. I thought to teach him to spiritwalk but he tried it on his own. Rush, rush, rush, all you young people have no patience, not even Oberon. Dworkin's theory is that a thing made for use here, but is there, which accidentally used to get here. Boy will be possession by thing with brother so the I can help him. One body made two to be in two places at once but not enough body to go around like too little butter spread over too much bread...too little over too much..."

As he rambled on about too little over too much, more old memories surfaced. I remembered once, long, long ago, sharing bread and honey with a Dworkin-that-was-not-Dworkin. I wondered if something similar had happened to him. I fervently hoped it had not.

To Dworkin I sent: "I will be there as soon as it is possible - look for us!"

I turned my attention to Alex. "So, young Alex, you are looked for..." As I stood, I shifted again, into something approaching my battle form: rudimentary bat-like wings, a leathery exoskeleton, my face, arms and legs all lean hard muscle. "We must go now. We will walk a ways..."

He offered no resistance, nor betrayed much emotion in reaction to my sudden shifts. We set out, again on the high limb road, to a place where a deadfall let us easily travel to the forest floor. I did not want to get to our

destination too soon, so we walked at an angle to where I intended to go. By the time dusk darkened to full night, we should be approaching the steps. My intention was that we get there exactly when we could climb, no sooner, no later.

As we traveled northeasterly through the forest, we periodically saw a glimmer of illumination to the south. It was not until the great forest thinned to scattered evergreens and pines that we could see the palace. It was, as always, breathtakingly beautiful. I was silent, concentrating on the trail ahead. We climbed higher, and the trees thinned more quickly than before. We caught glimpses beyond the palace, seeing the city, the farms, and the harbor that lay below us.

Alex asked me, "What is this place?"

I stopped and looked down and across the mountain. My eyes followed the twin rivers that flowed out of the forest to run on either side of the Palace before plunging off the heights into the Great Bay. Docks and warehouses cluttered the lands southwesterly of the falls, while rich estates dotted the lands of the northeastern end of the bay's crescent.

Between the rivers I saw gardens, monuments, parks and tombs. Beyond the spray of the falls, out in the bay, a district rose out of the waters. It was intersected by canals and patrolled by bright longboats. Rising above all of this, illuminated by moonlight and torches posted inside and out, was the Palace. With its many wings and buttresses, and with banners flying from its towers, it rose high enough to make one think it was a mountain itself. Even by moonlight the banners could be clearly read, a gold phoenix savaging a white unicorn on a field of green.

"That," I said slowly, "is Amber." I eyed the banner flying high above the bay. "And that," I nodded at the flag, "is the Usurper." I turned my head and spat. "He is an abomination, and very, very powerful. We must not tarry here." And I turned away, expecting him to follow.

He did not follow, but asked me, "What is the usurper's name?" I frowned and made a motion with my hand, waving away the question. He continued to look at the Palace for a few more seconds, taking in its glory. I could 'hear' him a bit as he pondered the idea of fighting Reynard. He considered Amber his true homeland, but he was wise enough to realize he had little power here. Finally, he ran to catch up with me. "Are you an

Amberite, Tamlin? How is it that you walk through Shadows? Is my body really here or is it still on the Earth?"

Now he found his questions. Exasperating child. I knew that Corwin felt he was keeping his children 'safe' by keeping them largely ignorant of the harsher realities of existence. This could only prove disastrous for them. I gave an inward sigh, and began to explain.



"I am of Old Amber. Oberon was my great-grandfather, but I was born off in shadow, much like you, and knew nothing of this land until I was fully grown." I paused, eyeing him with a hawk-like glance and wondering just how much to say. "I was given power in a time of need long past. History has forgotten why." I paused again, still climbing as I spoke, "As for you - I don't know your exact situation. We go to one who will know more, and who can See farther than I."

He mulled this a bit, then asked: "Why do you help one of 'Corwin's brats'?"

"Heh, a good question, and time you asked it." I looked at him with a ghost of a smile, "You remind me of myself - pulled into something you don't understand." I nodded, remembering, then stopped short, placing my hand on his shoulder and turning him toward me. "And you will make a good tool..."

...I looked into his eyes and laid a geis upon him - That he would tell his father everything he learned while he was here, and that he would show his father mind-to-mind what I now shared. I gave him encapsulated memories: horrors I have seen, specific and general, a veritable nightmare of atrocities, all blood shed by the usurper's hand. Alex would not be aware of these until his father triggered them, then they would share them. Within this capsule was my identity as a possible contact. I continued...

"...I hope that you will return here, in true form, as soon as you are able. We need every heart and soul we can muster for Amber's cause. She

must not be lost." We continued on our climb.

I heard Alex's thought, 'I do not like the sound of that - what could that mean - I will make a good tool?' But he said nothing to me for a moment, only to ask, "Who else is allied for Amber's cause?"

I shuddered inwardly - this one had no discretion, no realization of the danger he would place himself in. I cannot remember ever being so naive, not even as a toddler. True innocence is a dangerous thing. I turned to him brusquely, shaking his shoulder "I will not speak of such things." I kept my hand on his shoulder as I turned him to continue walking. Through the contact, I continued, mind-to-mind: *"It is not safe to speak of such things when one is unshielded. Reynard"* - contempt oozed from my mental voice - *"has long ears, and eyes everywhere. It is safe to assume that he watches us, even now. We make a very perilous journey."* I paused. *"Those who oppose him have a way of ending up - I will say 'indisposed.' Gerard's family is held within the castle. Moire and Rebma are held close to the beast, and they cannot win free. Llewella is likewise hostage. Others have raised against him and were captured, where they are now, I do not know."*

"Julian and I hold Arden. That is what I know."

Alex was quiet as we walked on. Then he asked, aloud, "Is Arden another plane of existence or is it simply connected to Amber? What kind of atrocities has this Reynard done?"

I was dumbfounded - after my explicit warning, still he spoke aloud? I gave him a sharp mental slap to the back of his head and mentally thundered **"QUIET, FOOL!"** I kept my fingers gripped on his shoulder as he flinched.

He was quiet for a moment, then began to mentally focus on some nonsense doggerel verse.

A wave of anger passed over me, directed at Corwin. *"How stupid is Corwin? Has he taught you nothing? Can you not mindspeak?"* He reeled under the pressure of my anger, and would have fallen but for my hand, still gripped upon his shoulder like Kiree's talons on fresh prey.

He was silent for a long moment. Then, tentatively, he thought to me, *"No, he taught me nothing."* He quietly seethed with anger, and I perceived that not all of it was directed at me.

I shook my head, ruefully. *"Well, you would do well to learn all you can, before you decide to visit again. This is a dangerous place for the*

unschooled."

He was silent, finally, and we began to make better time toward the stair. I stretched my steps, not wanting to be a moment late. Alex would have to be satisfied for now. He could learn more when he returned home.

His part in this was a mystery to me. I had an idea how he came to be here, but I had no idea why. As for me, I remained an unknown player, behind the scenes. I sensed, with this one's arrival, that my part might be changing. Surely my actions this night would not go unnoticed.

I had a sudden stab of fear at leaving Arden. It had protected me as much as I had protected it. And Julian - whom I gleefully tortured in his youth - did he know, these days, how much of my strength I gave his cause? I had come to greatly respect his love of Arden. Surely he was as aware of me as I was of him.

Breaking my line of thought, Alex continued, *"I am trying to school myself, my father has not been eager to teach me. He has forbidden me to study the occult, but I have not listened to him. I have been trying to prove to myself that there is a higher power than our kind.... You are an Amberite, aren't you Tamlin?"*

A crease of mild annoyance, or perhaps worry, crossed my brow. *"Are you deaf as well as untaught? I already told you I was born of the blood of Amber. Did you hear me this time?"* I paused, shook my head. *"And what sort of 'occult' have you been studying?"*

"Shamanism and the afterlife."

"Hhhmmmmph. Shamanism is all right, you usually won't end up dead as a novice shaman - but afterlife - what do you mean by afterlife?" I asked. I watched him closely - a sharp, sidelong look.

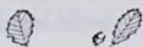
He replied mentally, coming easily enough to the skill. *"I mean where our spirits go when we die."*

I frowned. The concept of afterlife was always problematical for one such as I. For Alex, however, the answer was simple and academic. I sighed softly and replied, *"When death dissipates the force that fills the body, the spirit is lost. There is no life when death takes its claim."*

He remained unconvinced. *"I have seen things that would lead me to believe otherwise; things that have been seen not only by me, but my siblings as well. This has proven to me that there is an afterlife for our kind,*

and the people of earth as well."

My response was short. *"Shadows can be deceiving."*



I had something else to think about. I stopped just before the treeline ended, my attention focused on our path. We had reached the stair, a few short steps away, but there was something.... something was not right. On the other side of the clearing, the three stone steps led off the edge of the mountainside. We were a few seconds later than I had hoped, for the stairs were forming out of the moonlight before us. I looked to the sky, and noted a scattering of clouds. Not ideal conditions, but needs must. Far overhead, Tir-na Nog'th, the city of visions, glowed in the moonlight.

But what I sensed, and didn't sense, on the stone stairs disturbed me. I called up the Logrus, and looked through its whirling lens. Nothing became clearer. I reached a tentative tendril out, stopping short. There was something there, but it was wholly outside of my experience. I reached for Alex, and bespoke him again. *"There is something at the stair ahead of us. Its nature and intent are unknown to me. I cannot risk the use of power so close to our goal."*

Alex moved under my hand, turning to face the stair. He asked, *"What city is that?"* He leaned toward the stair, his foot shifted forward.... *"There is no more time for questions."* I mindspoke, *"Come!"* And with that little warning, I grabbed his hand. Breaking out from the tree line, I led him in a running arc toward the stairs.

I tried to contact Dworkin, furiously thinking at him; *"Dworkin! I said possession is not necessary - call off your dog!"* I sensed, tasted almost, the essence of iron. It lay like blood, like fear, on my tongue. I moved Alex as quickly as I could, silently cursing his illness. He stumbled against me, lurching toward the stair. I pushed him back, grabbed him with tendrils, adrenaline firing into new strength.

We reached the stone stair. I kept a firm hold of Alex's hand, and we began ascending. At the third step, as we were about to take the first step of moonlight and shadow, Alex stopped and looked back. I felt, through

him, the chill of cold iron touching his left arm. I heard, as if in a distant echo, the whisper of a voice... as the fire of Logrus and the frost of Pattern energies swirled about in us in ocean swells.

Through the contact of my touch, I borrowed his sight, to view a spectre behind us on the stairs. This must have been the brother Dworkin summoned, Henry. The form he wore marked him as another of Corwin's children. In his left hand was an iron ring with an iron key. I remained wary, not wanting to be trapped.

Alex said, "What form of Spirit is this?" He reached out to take the key. "Are you here to give me back the key?"

In a serious tone, Henry said, "I am here to escort you back, Alexander. You have very little time to spare. The key is only meant to guide me to you for now. Please continue." Motioning up the stairs, toward me, he asked, "Who is your companion?"

"Oh good," I broadcast sarcastically, "*another of Corwin's whelps. Great. Come, you may talk on the stairs, if you don't care about attracting extra attention...*" I pulled Alex along a bit, trying to get him moving on his own volition. I was full of the taste of iron now, and we stood fully exposed on the open stair. Another surge of adrenaline entered my system. Alex didn't move, waiting for his brother to speak... After a moment, he asked, "Do you know how I can get out of this dream, Henry? Before I have just woken up, but I fear I have been here too long this time."

I yanked Alex's shoulder and spoke aloud, with deep urgency, "Come on, already!" The sound of my voice hung in the air. I turned my head to look up the staircase and said, to no one in particular... "I told you this would not be necessary."

I put a second hand on Alex. I would drag him up the stairs if I had to. I glared at the apparition, which I could only see by 'borrowing' Alex's eyes. "I believe we have the same goal, let's get moving, already..."

Alex, looking over his shoulder, finally began to move up the staircase. I followed his line of sight as I pulled him up the stair. He was watching Arden. With each step we took, the vista changed, flickering, elusive. I saw the forest in despair, the miles of barren reaches, leafless trees, the dead silence of winter. I saw the summer country, the primordial forest in full health, whispers of motion indicating wildlife everywhere one looked. I

saw the forest, drawn in upon itself, only the heartwood holding green, haunted throughout by the ghosts of the lost. We reached the top of the stairs without further incident, but my heart was in pain, and I did not relax.

I turned and looked at the pair, and with a nod at the spirit guide, motioned with my hand for him to proceed. Henry continued to stare at Alex, and Alex at Henry. Henry looked to me. Then, raising his eyebrows, he took the lead. It did not take long to see that he had no idea where to go next. After watching him peer into yet another doorway, I motioned them to halt, and to follow me. I led them through the moonlit streets toward the palace.

We traveled through Tir-na Nog'th while the city continued its eerie life around us. Most of what we saw had no meaning for any of us, and we did not stop to watch. When we neared the castle, that changed. In the courtyard of a noble's house was Corwin, dressed in his trademark black and silver. He and a group of men were cornered, and were being cut down with crossbow bolts.

We turned the corner to view a flickering tableau. In it, the central figure clapped his/her hands, and with each clap, the scene changed. First was Reynard, his face contorted with pleasure, as he viewed the destruction of Corwin and his troops. He clapped his hands with the wild approval of a child witnessing an accident. Flicker. It changed to Roweena, her face searingly sober, her clapping filled with purpose. She watched as Bleys led his troops to doom. The two scenes fit together with a fearsome regularity. Reynard sat in a sling chair, made from the interlocking arms of two young men. My fists clenched as I saw that they were Martin and Merlin. Flicker. Roweena stood before her campaign chair, while on each side of her were seated two young women whom I had never met. They were obviously her daughters. Flicker. In both scenes, the clapping brought a movie-like strobe effect of motion. I watched as the troops fell, the blood soaking into the ground. And then, like an endless loop, the vision started again from the beginning. I turned away, and we continued along the silent way.

On the avenue leading to the entrance of the palace, we again saw Corwin. He led a troop of red werewolves, and was cheered on by the city's populace of humans and black werewolves wearing red, black and silver.

Upon entering the great hall of the palace, Corwin, in chains before

a King and his court, again lost his eyes to the blinding poker. My stomach churned. As Corwin turned toward us, writhing in pain, his face melted into a parade of related faces - I realized I must be seeing more of his children. Alex was there, and Henry, and several other faces. I did not see Merlin, which gave me yet another puzzle.

I looked to the end of the hall to see Fiona seated upon the throne, a shadowed form behind her. As I pointed, the vision faded, and it was Dworkin who was sitting on the steps before the throne. He smiled as we saw him.



Alex stepped forward, motioning with his arms. He must have been speaking, for Dworkin replied, his words ringing in my mind. By their reactions I could tell it was the same for my companions. He answered Alex, *"Of course you are Alexander, and of course you need my help, but you are gravely mistaken about being in a trance, and about standing before me as a spirit without flesh."*

Getting up, he began walking out of the throne room. As he crossed the center of the room, a small blazing blue crystal appeared and disappeared. He paid no attention to it as he exited the room and walked through a large dining hall. He continued to speak, *"You have done an incredibly foolish thing. You have misused a tool of special purpose and unique power as you play at being a shaman."* We followed as he walked down a short corridor and into the kitchen.

In the kitchen a series of visions occurred. I recognized Corwin, carrying a body rolled up in a blanket, but as we passed, the vision became an album of Corwin's children: two young men functioning as kitchen help, under the direction of a petite daughter, and Henry breaking up wood for the pot's fire. About to exit the kitchen, Dworkin paused and turned back, looking at Henry. *"You should really pay attention to what you are seeing, something you see may just make your continued existence worthwhile."* I looked at Henry, who responded with a darkened brow. Was this an admonition, or was it a threat? So hard to tell with Dworkin.

Dworkin turned to me and said, *"Once before you were caught up in the great affairs of the world and now you are again. And once again all actions may be necessary."*

This I feared would come to pass, and it was not, perhaps, a surprise to me. I had long known that a secret cannot be kept forever, and that I would, in time, leave my green myth and rejoin the world of history.

Dworkin continued speaking as he walked through the doorway. *"As for young Alexander here, he has, by accident no doubt, entered play early through his own misguided efforts. He has accomplished that which only Zhorthra, Nestor, and a very select few might even try - although even they would never consider doing such."* He grew silent for a while.

We walked through a vegetable garden, the size of a football field. All the plants were dead, but as Dworkin picked his way amongst them, they sprouted new leaves, grew flowers and quickly ripened fruit. I couldn't help but think of Arden, in its silent winter despair.

As we approached the stables, a figure, made even more ghost-like by the white armor it wore, rode off in great haste. Morgenstern's hooves plowed through the mists. Dworkin turned and smiled at me. My stomach tightened. When the dust settled I saw six women dressed like something out of the Arabian Desert, riding horses similar to those in the first vision. I couldn't tell who they were, or if I was among them.

The party continued on in silence until we finally came upon a hedge maze in the center of a lawn, somewhere north of the palace. Dworkin stopped before the entrance. *"You can not leave by the same rabbit hole you entered, and sources of true power would attract notice. Here, however, we may play at power and with this toy, act to send you both back."* He turned to Henry. *"May I have the key?"*

As Henry handed Dworkin the key, Alexander said something I couldn't hear.

Dworkin looked at Alex, and then answered, *"Have I ever encountered a God, a true God? A being perfect in power, wisdom and goodness who would be worshiped by all as the creator and ruler of the universe? One whose power and presence precedes that of self, Pattern, Logrus or Magic? No, child, there is no god that I know of - unless it is Primal Chaos - which preceded all else. But chaos is destruction and not creation: it*

is ever growing, continuously consuming the stuff of reality, as the desert claims the plains and grasslands at its edge, or the waters erode the land on its shore, or wind wears down the tall mountain. Chaos is entropy manifested and has no sentience. No child, although there are many who have been creators, many whose power is greater than mine, I have never met any whom I would name a God, as those in shadow have named us."

Alexander looked at Dworkin for a moment, then said something sadly.

My eyebrows rose and for a moment I looked only to the stars above. I too, had a question for Dworkin, and I thought to him, *"What will you do now? Are you safe here?"*

Dworkin raised the ring and key and then paused, considering the question. He turned to face me. *"Do? I am doing. I have been doing since I returned. As to the other, within the Moonlight and Shadow of Tir-na Nog'th it is almost safe, for that one fears the wisdom that its visions might bring. He considers them the cause of his father's failure. 'Perhaps if Brand hadn't seen. Perhaps if Brand hadn't acted. Perhaps maybe Corwin might not have returned in time.' Yes, it is safe, but it is not safe for me to make too much too plain to you, for you can not dwell here and still walk abroad in Arden."*

With that he turned to the task at hand. Raising the ring with its key to eye level, he hung it in mid-air. After a few moments, he sent it flying off into the maze with a dismissive gesture.

Turning back to Alexander and Henry, he spoke slowly, *"While traversing this maze you will see visions of events to come, and unlike some of Tir-na Nog'th's visions you have thus far seen, these will be visions of true sight. Visions that either will or must come to pass. Try to pay attention. Try to remember them."*

"Now have no fears, but act with caution and follow my direction, for I will be with you. Once begun, like a path of true power, you can not reverse your course and can only continue to the end."

"Henry, as you came last, you must now go first, so that as Alexander follows the circle will be closed, with all as it must be for now."

Alexander looked around him, taking it in to remember. He waited for Henry to move. Henry nodded and walked forward first, paying strict

attention to his surroundings. Alexander followed. With each step, the boys shrunk in exaggerated perspective, as they moved into the maze. They continued forward for several yards and then turned to the right. As they walked, they passed up opportunities to go in other directions, and I realized Dworkin must be guiding them. From my vantage point, I should not have been able to see with such clarity; yet even without shifting my vision, I could see as clear as they the path they traveled.

After a series of turns, Henry, with Alexander following closely behind, came to an open garden area with paths leading off to the right and the left as well as ahead. In the garden was a small pond with fish and across the pond from the boys was a bench. Upon the bench sat a tall, very thin man. Long brown hair hid his face as he sat with his head in his hands. A broken weapon lay at his feet. He was gaunt to the point of starvation. He looked up, and in his eyes was the very personification of death. A large, blond, clean-shaven man was comforting him. I recognized them both.

Again, I heard Dworkin's voice. *"Yours is the wrong path, take the right one; behold the finest warriors of your bloodline. One broken, one whole. Beware of singularity of focus. Only through diversity and the embracing of change is survival a possibility."* Henry turned right without hesitation and continued walking. Alexander stopped for a second to think about this, before continuing on. Henry jerked to a stop and then began moving toward the center opening. Dworkin's voice said, *"You are still not paying attention. Listen to my words and heed them, but feel for your way as well."* Alexander almost stumbled into Henry.

They progressed straight on for a space, passing three alcoves on the right. In each of these alcoves a scene was playing out, the same vignette, with different characters - it appeared to be a proposal. In the first I saw my grandfather, Gideon. He was earnestly appealing to a dark-haired woman. I stood amazed, for I know who she must be: my grandmother, dead long before I was born. The boys' glance was but cursory at this tableau, for they did not know these. In the second, Corwin bent his knee to Deirdre. This view they left less quickly. In the final alcove, I saw the petite daughter of Corwin, and with her was Merlin. I blinked, startled by this revelation, and the boys almost stopped, their steps proceeding slowly, until the vision itself began to fade and they continued on.

At the next fork, the two took the left pathway, which led into another garden clearing. In its center was a gazebo with a high hedge surrounding it. Their path took them fully around the gazebo - whereupon a vision was revealed of a double wedding, two young men in black and silver marrying two young women dressed all in white. The faces of all involved were blurred beyond recognition, participants and spectators alike. Dworkin's voice was heard again, "*Behold the path to salvation and redemption. How it is to be achieved and by whom, is beyond my field of vision.*"

I could not help but smirk. Marriage as a path to redemption... Hmm, I wonder what Merlin would have to say to that?

I jumped, as Dworkin's voice again sounded loud in my head. "*All will be made clear in time. Now hurry, you have less than an hour before the dawn.*"

Once again, with Henry in the lead, this latest vision was left behind as the brothers continued deeper into the hedge maze. After a series of six sharp turns, a clockwise arc brought them to the center of the maze. There in the large open area, grown to enormous proportions, was the ring and the key. The ring was now roughly thirteen feet in diameter and standing on its side. Hanging down in the center of it, touching the ground, was the key.

There was, however, one last thing to be seen. As I watched, I sensed it is the same for all of us. Hanging in the air, directly in front of us, was a glowing red light. As soon as I looked upon it, it filled my vision, blocking out all else. "*Behold, the final goal, the destiny that must be achieved to complete the cycle of coming events,*" proclaimed Dworkin.

He continued, "*Henry must walk to and then through the center of the ring. Lift the key out of your way and then proceed home. Alexander, you are to follow after Henry has passed through.*" I watched the two young men disappear, and then turned to Dworkin.



"Walk with me?" I asked, knowing he would understand. I wished to talk a bit, hoping it was safe to do so, trusting that no other would hear our discussion...

"Certainly," he replied, "*but we only have a moment, already the sun is rising.*"

I gathered my courage. "*You know I am going to approach Julian. If nothing else, we should be coordinating our efforts to strengthen our defense. My forest is his now. The Glimmer-green will fail when I am gone, but I can always rebuild that.*" I paused. "...more or less," I amended. I sighed, suddenly missing the beauty of Arden in its power. I went on, "*I am worried about the others. Especially my cousin from the courts.*"

I glanced at Dworkin... "*I am afraid to try these,*" (I fingered the pocket where I kept my trumps...) "*My sight, my dreaming, is distorted, confused... the scry is turbulent and broken... and I can't See... I fear for Merlin. I have not heard from him since...*" I shuddered, left the thought unspoken, and continued, "*I fear for us all. Dworkin, what is next? Can I do anything?*" I gave him a wry look - "*And don't pretend that this little adventure*" - I motioned to the area we have just left - "*wasn't entirely orchestrated.*"

His voice rumbled in my head. "*As well you should fear, Reynard has taken upon himself power that even Oberon and Dworkin feared to wield. Most dreams and visions now reflect his mind. As for coordinating, there is nothing to coordinate. Soon a storm of outrageous righteousness will lay siege to Reynard and Amber. Afterwards you will be needed to rebuild more than your Glimmer-green.*"

"*Our cousins will not come to our aid, for they fear both the strength of Reynard and that which shall bring him down. Yes, everything has been orchestrated for the eventual return of Corwin and his offspring, for it will be their task to re-set the balance and attempt to restore Amber. Help them, if you can, when they arrive.*"

Tir-na Nog'th was fading, the sky brightening behind the city's veil of transparent stone. My footing grew spongy and uncertain.

"*A last word, child, to not abandon Arden, for it will need you. And be prepared for the great changes that shall befall you.*" As the city, and Dworkin too, began to fade, his last words were a prayer out of Shadow,

"Now I lay Dworkin down to sleep..."

I fully morphed out my wings, and as the sun dissolved the semblance of stone beneath my feet, I fell into a glide. I circled once, high and fast, casting a hawk's gaze to all below. Palace Amber was blindingly bright in the low rays of the sun; and below, deep below, I could see the shimmer that was Rebma - ghostly in the sea. I set my course and fell, a peregrine's stoop, lightning fast - straight into the heart of Arden...



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THOUGHTS ON TRUMP ARTISTRY

by Michael Kucharski

The sophisticated Amber player should bring with him a background that includes exposure to philosophy, physical and cultural anthropology, and art history. When you are thinking about playing a trump artist, having a class or two in basic drawing or painting is certainly not out of place. If this was not included in your education, you should be willing to do a little research. Why? Because the more you understand the perspective and motivations of an artist, the better you will be able to apply them to the Trump Artist you play.

To a creative soul, a 'true artist', the production of artwork is not merely a means to feed and clothe oneself, or to line one's purse, or to gain fame or power. It is a need; an urge to create which can not be suppressed. Stop and think for a moment. Dworkin is a Trump Artist, and the creator of the Pattern. Why did he do these things? What motivated him? And how does this need to create relate to your character?

For any artistic Amberite this need, the compulsion to create, should be no different. It may even be more pronounced, for an Amberite can "find" all the outer trappings of success in Shadow. To create something that is unique in all of shadow is a talent only an Amberite can possess. Some questions to ponder, as you create your character, or as your character begins to learn trump artistry: how does your Trump Artist think? Why does he create? Is he a 'true artist'? Or is he a technician, merely creating a device for communication? The answer to these will affect both what he creates and how he utilizes it. And finally, what do his creations look like? In order to answer this, we should review the history of western art.

Art's beginnings lie deep in the realm of sympathetic magic. What we now call 'art' was intended to aid the hunt, and to open communication with the spirit world. Later, the focus switched from the unseen spirit world to the equally mystic concept of 'the spirit in man.' Art began to depict the human form, as a means to express the numinous concept

of the Holy Spirit; the Gods and Goddesses wore human form, in order to communicate with man.

Eventually, as wandering tribes became rooted communities, both religious and political leaders began to portray themselves as numinous. God-priests and God-kings appeared in the art of the time. These images, however, remained stiff, formal and stylized - glamorized icons of perfection that few mortals could ever measure up to. Egypt and Assyria provide good examples of this.

As man began to see himself as the center of reality, the images became increasing faithful, more realistically rendered, then they had been before. Witness the depth of detail, and the idealized portrayal of humanity in the Hellenistic period of Grecian art; a style continued and further humanized by the Romans. After the fall of Rome, as the focus of artistic endeavors became the church, the bible became the main source material. God, his son, the saints and the disciples became primary images. Ordinary people were also shown, in pictorial narratives of the parables.

Later, after the first millenium passed, man began to turn his attention to the past, and its glories were rediscovered. The Renaissance was more than mere nostalgia. Old styles, formulas and techniques were embraced and improved. Art continued to be the tool used to depict the glory of creation and the creator, but now it also glorified mortal man.

As the concepts of spiritual thought waned, the concepts of rational thought waxed to replace them. In art, a new realism arose. All of life - youth, old age, zits, tooth decay - and all of life's imperfections were now being presented on canvas.

Then, with the arrival of photography, the artistic community had cause to question their function and role in society. Their unity in the realistic rendering of everyday 'present' life was shattered. Why recreate what the camera already does? Out of this dilemma, uncountable movements were born. Artists began exploring ideas which were once only an aspect of the whole - color, shape, value, hue, line, light and dark - these become the end, rather than the means.

All of this is your source material. Any of these eras, these artists, these styles may influence your trump artistry. As a trump artist, you are plagued with choices.

One of these choices is whether or not a trump image need be photographically realistic in its representation. Consider the following examples. A Paleolithic cave painting clearly identifies and captures the essence of the creatures upon its wall, so that you know who or what they are. Now imagine a Paleolithic Gerard. This is easy, picture a figure with a large chest, shoulders and biceps, no discernable neck, and proportionately small head and legs. Unfortunately, many Amberites seem to be of heroic proportions, so perhaps only size or color might differentiate Gerard from Eric.

Perhaps something a little more esoteric is to your taste. Visualize a trump rendered after the figurative style of the Irish Book of the Kells, or the Byzantine and the Ethiopian mosaics. This would be flat in color, linear and stylized beyond recognizable realism. Those not intimately familiar with the subject (the individual depicted in the trump) would not be able to discern subtle but important elements such as eye color, shirt color or symbols. Such uninformed individuals might not be sure they were reaching Caine, Eric or Gerard. They are all dark and bearded. A similar bit of confusion could occur between a horseless Brand and a beardless Bleys (or Rinaldo).

A more modern example might be more abstract in imagery, perhaps a representation through the depiction of objects. A deerstalker cap, a clay pipe and a magnifying glass will say Sherlock Holmes as well as any portrait or profile might. A trump of a hundred different weapons, on a banner of yellow and brown, with a small flower atop would accurately portray Benedict. Alternating strips of black, red and silver with be recognizable as Eric, and cards, dice and drums over plans for a hand glider would easily be seen as Random.

Note that each of the previous examples revolves around the premise of keeping communication limited to the initiated, not to be shared with strangers, or in some cases, not even kin. Considering the general nature of the sons, daughters and grandchildren of Oberon, it seems very natural that they would want to keep the use of (personal) trumps to themselves. It is

possible that someone might only produce these less obvious depictions with advanced or exalted trump artistry, as a way of avoiding the sharing of special knowledge.

Each trump artist must also choose whether or not to use color. Serious or very thoughtful use of color might be another way in which an accomplished trump artist, doing totally realistic or representational art, might confuse the uninitiated. Confusion could be created by using black and white renderings with heavy shadows concealing details; or by graying down color so far that reds and greens might look the same, yellows fade into whites, and dark colors could only barely be distinguished from black.

These are not the only choices available. For instance, in the novels, all trumps are recognizable, but there is mention of different rendering styles. The style of the art should reflect the personality and psychological profile of the artist.

I could easily argue that someone like Brand might visualize and paint like Vincent Van Gogh, to reflect the deepening mood swings, which led him to an emotional abyss and insanity. However, this may be too obvious a choice and I might opt for someone with rather more flair, like the American portraitist, John Singer Sargent. Both artists have clearly identifiable brush strokes, both are recognizable in their likeness, but their styles differ greatly. Either could be Brand's work, or neither for that matter. It is a subjective rather than objective choice on my part. Your character's choice is for you to decide, you should chose something that will work for your character.

Most people gravitate towards realism, as it is easier to understand and appreciate. This is no more right or wrong than any other choice. But even realism is not so easily pinned down, for there is realism, photo-realism, and super-realism, all differing slightly from one another.

Realism is rather self-explanatory. The closer the object is to the viewer, the more definition and detail is applied, and everything in the background receives less attention. In other words, a simple portrait created by any competent painter.

Photo-realism, like its name, moves the direction of the rendering towards photography, where only the center of attention is focused. The point of attention or focus is fully delineated; everything else gets softer and less defined as you moved away from the center. To utilize this in Corwin's

trump, only Corwin's features, and maybe the rose cloak clasp, near his face, are defined, detailed and sharp.

In Super-realism, the artist renders everything in full and equal detail, leaving nothing untouched by artistic license. Disregarding focus and perspective, every leaf on every tree in Arden can be made out in full detail, as the bright, gleaming, shining, white, full figure of Julian stands before it. This does sound like the work of Dworkin, with the attention to detail that Corwin spoke of. With all that detail, the eye would have no natural place to rest. It would take an act of strong will to find a point or center to concentrate on, to bring a trump to life, and to make trump contact.

Many things will influence the artist's work. Where an individual received his training, the school of trump artistry or the particular style of a tutor or mentor, will reflect in the early work of that artist. After some time, the artist's work will develop into his own unique style. Exposure to high impact popular visual cultures, anti-image cultures or just rebellion against conventional norms could easily lead a budding artist to a change their artistic style. The artist's own natural inclination may be such, that no matter how hard he tries to follow the traditional artistic path, or attempt to fit into the current popular trends, he will always seem to end up going his own way. An excellent example of such artistic behavior is found in the life and works of Vincent Van Gogh.

So, how is all of this reflected in my work? Everything that I will talk about here has been rendered to be camera ready, commissioned for reproduction in print. This limits the palette to simple black and white. Any work produced with grey tones requires an extra photographic process before it can be acceptably reproduced. (Try this for yourself – take a nicely shaded pencil drawing and run it through the Xerox machine – you will immediately see the problem)

For Dworkin's trumps, I wanted realism, as close to continuous tone rendering as I could get, without requiring halftones for reproduction. I chose ink and wax pencil on Ross board; with its stippled surface, it was almost perfect to achieve that end.

For the Amber DRPG book, three of the trumps shown are ostensibly by the hand of Merlin. Merlin, at this early stage, was a sensitive, naive, innocent and gentlemanly young artist, only recently cut loose from his mother's apron strings and still a touch unsure of himself. After a few experiments, I chose linen board and graphite in an attempt to capture the thoughts, the feelings and the mind of the artist in trump form. The Merlin trumps, in general, appear more sensitive in portraying their subjects as people, not pawns.

For the Amberzine trumps, there were various challenges. The first was, how would the artist Harlan would visualize his trump images? Eric Schneider, who plays Harlan in two different campaigns, is a student of Dworkin in both. It seemed logical, having been taught by such a strong personality, that Harlan's style should be a continuation of Dworkin's, with some sort of twist. In the art for Bronwyn's Tale, it was decided that all the characters would be shown with a window or a door in the background, as if these objects might humanize the characters, and allow the viewer to open them and look into the characters' souls. This idea, of a background element playing a role in revealing the nature of the character, was carried over into the renderings for Eric Wujick's main body campaign.

Then came the Wolves... they had been originally conceived, by Morgan, to be his personal storm troopers. All shared the same parents. All were shapeshifters. All were outlaws. All were different. So both unity and individuality needed to be shown. A 'wolf' badge was given each of them, as a mark of unity. Where do you find wolves? In the forest. Trees were chosen as the background and backdrop against which the desires, dreams, needs and personalities of the characters would be reflected, if the viewer could decipher them.

For ShadowKnight, I made serious effort to visualize how a Chaos trump was made. This trump of Martin did not see publication. However, it seemed to me that a Chaos trump might be a fragmented image, like a cubist painting, showing multiple aspects of the same individual as a means to reveal the shapeshifting nature of Chaosians. Or perhaps a 60's psychedelic poster, with each aspect melting into the next. The latter was chosen for the trump, with only partial success, as color was truly required to pull off the effect.

In the campaigns I have run, Chaos trumps are powered by the Logrus, not an independent power source, and all Chaosians are shapeshifters. Similarly, the Pattern powers Amber trumps. Therefore, a Pattern based Trump Artist is unable to capture the likeness of a shapeshifter, because the Pattern trump would be a static image - a preserved unchanging representation, an inflexible reality - all the things a shapeshifter isn't. Therefore an attempt to capture a shifter's image would always be inaccurate, as a shifter is always in a state of constant, although perhaps otherwise undetectable, change. On the other hand, a Logrus based Trump Artist should, with considerable ease, be able to render an Amberite, as they are a visual still life by comparison.

Finally, we come to the Trumps of Doom, some by Brand, some by his pupils. Remembering that Brand had fallen into the Abyss, I chose to incorporate that story element, together with the idea of attacks from beyond the grave, by having all the cards have a black background against which the subject would be seen. I also wanted these trumps to seem bolder, stronger and more threatening, so I chose as graphic a rendering approach as possible. Thus I used Duo-tone board, a photomechanical shading medium, and heavy black inked masses and shapes, with white bordering outlines around the subject. The result is a strong and immediate visual impact and response. These are no gentlemanly attempt to get to know someone, something or someplace. These trumps are tools to be used. These are "Black and Decker" trump, if you will.

Trumph production in role-play should reflect some realities. I am in disagreement with Eric Wujcik on an important issue - creating a trump should take longer than two days. I will use some examples to illustrate why I believe this. My business card, painted in 1991, might very well be taken for a trump image. It contains all sorts of symbolism you might find in a trump. This image represents the time spent to produce three or four preliminary sketches, a couple of color studies, and then some forty hours of labor for the final portrait. What then, are the benefits of experience? "Arthur of the Britons," painted in 1982, required the same amount of preparation time and took eighty hours to complete. So, yes, experience counts for something. There is a point, however, where you reach a limit to

this time gain. Certain mediums or techniques can reduce time, but short cuts will affect quality.

Now you may have seen some of those Chinese or Japanese Sumi-e paintings, masterpieces one and all, done in a few dozen strokes. Please remember that those Sumi-e masters have spent every day of their lives, for the last twenty or thirty years, working toward mastering this technique. They may be able to simply enter a room, which has been specifically prepared for this work, sit down before a piece of rice paper and a bowl of water, take up the ink with a brush, and with a few deft brush strokes produce a painting. Such painters have years of training, in only one style or stroke, to produce art in a matter of minutes, working wet on wet.

Also please consider the works of the great portrait artists. John Singer Sargent, Sir Edward Burne-Jones, Rembrandt Van Rijn, Leonardo De Vinci, Norman Rockwell; none of these masters simply sat someone down and completed a finished painting. All of them first experimented with color, light, shadow, poses and so on. Sargent lived with his subjects for months, while he painted them. Leonardo's 'St. John the Baptist' hung in his studio 'unfinished' for years before he added the last 'missing' element. Rembrandt had a very successful career as a portraitist, until he decided to cut corners while painting the 'Night Watch'.

If a trump is the essence of the individual, filtered through the Trump Artist's eyes and hands, then every bit of body language, garment choice, jewelry, weapons, background and lighting makes a difference. These elements should be considered by every role player, in order to more fully flesh out their character. And each additional element included will add more time to the process.

An artist can only work so fast. Paints only dry so fast. Accidents, interruptions and all the possibilities of random chance slow the process further, delay upon delay. There is much to consider.

So both the GM and player should consider the development the character's Trump Artist skills; a newly acquired skill or power, without a long history of study should not be allowed to turn out trumps like a Xerox machine. There is progress. There is change. There is growth. Which, if you truly consider this line of thought, has much in common with role playing, where in the best situations characters experience change and growth.

In closing, when you play a trump artist, try to think like an artist. Trump portraits are not 'Kodak' instamatic moments. The thought, guile, creativity, cunning, openness, closeness, understanding and the lack of understanding of your character should all be a part of how you play the role.

Michael Kucharski's earliest memories of drawing involved some trouble he had in kindergarten. Since then he has gotten better, he can now follow instructions. At nine years of age, he discovered Howard Pyle's *The Story of King Arthur* in a small two-room public library. Images of heroic knights and fair ladies captured his imagination. Some six thousand (plus) novels later, those images are still dear to his heart. He started his art education with the Famous Artist Correspondence Course (found on the back of a comic book), and finished it, finally, with a BFA from the School of the Society of Arts & Crafts. He has been a graphic designer, art director, art teacher, cartoonist, and illustrator. As a fine artist, his efforts have included wildlife sculpting, printmaking, and painting. His involvement in comic books and SF & Fantasy began in the late sixties. Since then he has worked for many book and magazine publishers, in addition to gaming companies.



prelude to a prince

The Tale of Hadrian, Prince of Amber
by K. Michael Thomas

Which tells how a son of a simple Count learns of his family tree and inherits a timeless legacy which grants him the powers of the universe...

*Wherein a terrible crime is committed
and a boy becomes a man . . .*

Count Bronson of the court of Begma died today. I learned of his death early in the morning and the news troubled me, though for reasons one might find strange. I was not particularly moved by the event, not in the manner I think one should be, perhaps because it came as no great surprise. (Though that is more sinister than I mean to imply.) I should have been saddened deeply, outraged perhaps, full of vengeance and fire. Denial would have been appropriate as well. But none of these besieged me. I was calm, collected, with the manner of an impartial observer. Such a manner would be expected from a man who did not know the Count, and such a manner might be excused for a person who knew him only briefly and had few dealings with him. But such a manner is not becoming, I think, for his son. Me.

I had just taken my first long leave from the Royal Amber Navy. After two years of service I came home to Begma for a month or two. I was seventeen. One of the first things I did was fence with father. He could beat me, still. I'll never know how long it would have taken me to finally win.

It was a few days after that when the Housemaster came to my room in the early morning. He woke me, and I could see his body quivering. "Sir Hadrian, I bring dreadful news," he said.

"Is it my father?" asked I.

He stammered, not expecting my correct assumption. "Yes."

"You haven't come to tell me he's dead, have you?" I was serious. Why I said that in particular, I don't really know. It was a premonition of sorts.

Again he stammered, and for the same reason. "I had hoped to find some gentle way of telling you, but I see that is no longer necessary."

"Take me to him. Now."

I was led to my father's bedchamber. The sheets were soaked in blood, issued out from a gaping slash across his throat. It was horrible, and I looked on it with clinical eyes, just a tiny spasm of response between my lungs. In the pool of blood on the smooth wooden floors lay a dagger, its

steel blade stained like a painter's brush. I procured a clean handkerchief and picked the weapon up by the pommel. The whole of it was covered in blood. I wiped off the black hilt, uncovering the sign of its master: a silver cross inside a silver circle.

Black and silver. My mother's colors, though not her emblem. Hers was a silver crescent on a black disc. And where was mother when this terrible thing occurred? She was away. And do I blame her for being away? No, for she was Deirdre, a Princess of Amber, and it is not the fate of those of the blood to marry and settle down, but rather to come and go like a refreshing spring rain. They of Amber make their own rules, and abide by no one's sense of good manners save their own. I do not begrudge them for it, for that is the way it should be.

No, I was not familiar with the emblem on this loathsome dagger. Not yet.

"Seems rather unprofessional to leave the murder weapon lying on the floor," I mused aloud. "Why do you suppose the assassin left it here, like an obvious clue for us to find and perhaps track back to its owner? If he was suprised, he may have left it in his haste, but you said my father was discovered, was found alone. It hardly seems the murderer had to flee suddenly."

"Oh, the dagger. That was not found on the floor. It had been . . . removed."

"Oh," said I. I wrapped the stained dagger in a clean cloth having no desire to wash it thoroughly. Better, I thought, to keep something of the murder intact. The blood would make a good remembrance. I wanted the knife close to me, perhaps to make sure it wasn't lost or because of some sentimental reason, and so tucked it in my belt.

"Word has been sent to the Lady of the House," said the Housemaster.

"Good," I whispered, and knew not whether I was heard, for I was deep in thought. "Tell me," I said to the Housemaster.

"Yes, sir?"

"It is well known that my father made many enemies. Are there any with whom he has had recent conflict?"

"There is an issue concerning Begma's trade agreements which

Lord Randolphe has been opposing. Your father's position, of course, was to broaden Begma's sphere of commerce."

"I see." That seemed far too ordinary a matter to warrant a political assassination. No help there. This could have been an attack for an old debt, but I'm afraid I knew too little of my father's dealings to guess at possible foes along those lines.

"Was the room secured? Windows locked? And the door?"

"Yes, sir. There is also the grounds patrol which reported no disturbances during the night."

"Was anything stolen?"

"I've not had the time, as yet, to conduct an inventory."

"That could be important; may give us a clue as to the assassin's master."

"I shall make it my highest priority."

"How long before my mother arrives?"

"I sent the fastest messenger on our fastest horse. She should get word in a day, then take another day to return here . . . if she is at court in Amber, that is."

I nodded, and was about to leave when the Housemaster stopped me.

"Sir, I fear for your safety. I wondered whether you might move to a safer place."

"A safer place? These windows are locked, the door as well. The assassin made his way in despite that and the guardsman. What place is safe?"

"If I may suggest, I think it would be prudent if you were to at least sleep in other than your own room tonight."

"All right. Bring me a report of whatever evidence you uncover, and I want to see my mother as soon as she arrives."

"Of course, sir."

I turned to go when a notion struck me. "One more thing . . ."

"Yes, sir?"

"Who is Master of the House, now?"

"Why, that would be you, Master Hadrian."

"And do I inherit my father's title, as well? Am I now Count?"

"Yes, sir. Of course, the King has to make official declarations and all that."

"Hmm. An interesting motive, don't you think?"

The Housemaster turned pale at my suggestion, and for a few seconds choked for words, until, "You don't mean to say . . . that is, you surely don't mean to suspect yourself . . . ?"

"No. Though I am sure there are others who might make the accusation." I left him, and walking the halls that afternoon felt oddly lost in my own house.

Later that evening, the Housemaster came to me. No other clues arose, and only one thing was missing from my father's bedchamber: a small sculpture of a spiraled horn. "The horn was a matter of some contention between Count Bronson and a Lord Heward who envied it. The lord sought to purchase the horn from your father, but was always refused," he explained.

"I meant to show you this earlier," and I held out the dagger to him, the silver cross clearly visible, "but I . . . forgot." This was wholly true.

"Well, this puts things in order. The silver cross and circle happen to be the mark of Lord Heward."

"Is Lord Heward in a position to hire assassins?"

"Well, I'm not sure—"

"Was my father in a position to hire assassins if he so wished?"

"I suppose, if he had need of them, yes."

"Is Lord Heward in a similar position as my father?"

"Yes, sir."

"I see. A convenient frame."

"Sir?"

"Do you know Lord Heward to be a stupid man?"

"No, sir, I don't know him as well as that."

"But he hires an assassin to kill my father, the Count, with a weapon bearing his own sign. Then he has the assassin leave the weapon sticking in his body for us to find, all over a matter which they had publically quarreled, namely the sculpture which is now missing."

"If the item is in Lord Heward's possession, then it would seem to be proof enough."

"Whoever was responsible for my father's death breached the house undetected and killed him where he slept. It would seem a simple thing for such a one to plant the horn at Lord Heward's residence. It will be in a place where he will not find it for days, but where we, after a thorough search, will uncover it, and with the added reality of the cross-emblazoned dagger, prove his responsibility for this terrible crime. I don't believe it. Lord Heward has been framed. Nevertheless, what are my legal options, as Count, to bring action against Lord Heward?"

"I-I'll have to look into it, sir."

"Thank you." Perhaps Lord Heward was innocent, but there was no need for the true villain to discover we were not the imbeciles he had taken us for.

*Wherein an unexpected visit leads to
a trip longer than imagined, and a
legacy is revealed . . .*

It was the season for rude awakenings. I was startled out of sleep by a clamorous voice that was not unfamiliar. Even raised as it was in hostile fear, aimed like an arrow at the household staff, I could not mistake the clear, full, tenorous sound of mother's yelling. She was yelling for me.

I was in the far wing of the house away from my bedroom, as the Housemaster insisted. Apparently mother was not made aware of this, and went looking for me in the opposite side of the house, and not finding me, panicked as mothers are wont to do.

"Here, mother," I called as I opened the door. I dressed quickly in a simple robe.

"Thank God, Hadrian. I thought the worst." She threw her arms around me and nearly crushed me.

"I'm so sorry mother. I didn't mean to cause you so much worry. The Housemaster thought I would be safer sleeping here," I explained

"Smart man. Come, I want to show you something."

She led me back to my regular bedroom, where a man lay dead on

the floor. Numerous sword wounds decorated his body, and I glanced towards the sword that hung at mother's side. It was in its scabbard, and I could see no trace of blood on it, so I asked, "You found him here, dead?"

"No, but I made him so quickly enough." Her voice was full of anger. "I found him when I came to wake you. He was sent to kill you."

I went to the body and ran my hands over it to find some sign of its master. A black hilted dagger was clutched in its right hand, and on the guard was etched a silver cross inside a silver circle. I gave it to my mother. "This is a match for the dagger that killed father."

"Lord Heward," she said when she saw the emblem.

"I think it to be a feeble frame. Lord Heward isn't that stupid."

"No, he isn't. There is more to this than Lord Heward." Her confidence told me that she knew much of what was behind this deed, though I did not feel it my place to delve deeper. Not with my mother. She would tell me what she wanted me to know, when she wanted me to know it.

Still looking at the dagger she said, "I spoke with the Housemaster. He told me one of your suspicions."

"Which one?" I asked, and could not help the slight smile.

"By your face, you know which one." She was quite stern, her face drawn and dark as she looked up at me. "If I find any piece of it to be true in any way . . ." There was a threat waiting to be spoken, and I was frightened. Hurt too, that she would even consider that of me.

"Mother," I said softly, "I merely meant to keep a trained mind, to explore all the possibilities. If I was to uncover the plot behind father's death I needed to consider all the angles. I think father would have berated me had I not considered it. Besides, there will surely be others to make that connection, and I should be prepared to defend myself against such charges. For an adequate defense, one must anticipate."

No more was said about it. Not even a word of apology, nor of reassurance. You are quite a piece of work, mother.

She felt my home in Begma to be no longer safe, and so we packed two horses and left there for a kingdom I had never heard of. On the next day we entered lands strangely foreign to me. Strange because they should not have been foreign.

"I thought I knew this trail, but it's different than I remembered," I

said.

"You once asked about brothers and sisters," she said by way of answering. We had spoken of the matter once. I, growing up an only child with only father most of the time, had asked about marriage and other familial things. The conversation wound around to whether mother, not living with us and having a horde of step-siblings herself, had any other children. She never answered me as talk drifted to lines of succession and stories of my uncles.

"Yes, I remember."

"We ride to meet one now. He is son to the King of the land we travel to."

"A brother?"

"You and he are heirs to a legacy, of which this road we ride is a small part. He has already claimed his legacy, but there will not be time to teach you how to claim yours. I must ride back to Begma before the trail of Bronson's death grows cold. After I have finished there, I will return to you. But in the meantime, you must put yourself into the care of your brother." She paused for a moment in reflection, then said, "I don't think he will harm you." An odd thing to say of a person, I thought, especially of a person's brother whom one has not yet met.

"Do you have reason to believe he may wish me harm?"

"No. Which is why I think he won't." She spoke strangely, not in timber or tone, but her mood was something I had not seen before. This talk of harm and brothers seemed too close a relation, something she took too much for granted.

"That seems . . ." my voice faltered, and I could not express my confusion.

"Do you remember what I told you about Corwin and Eric? The duels they fought, the rivalry between them. How Eric is thought to be responsible for Corwin's long absence?"

"I thought that to be a unique fraternal experience."

She shook her head. "It is the way of our kind. Don't worry too much. I think you can trust him. Be wary of him, but trust him."

"How much can I trust him?"

"We'll see." She spurred her horse forward, and I rode to keep up.

"How old is he?" I yelled to be heard.

"Older than you."

"Much older?"

"A fair bit." Trouble. If mother ever became Queen of Amber the road to the throne may be a long one.

It was not until we were far from Begma that I realized mother had come for me after only a single day had passed since father's death, when two should have been necessary.

*In which brother meets
brother and a quest is begun .*

The land became parched and rocky. Sharp jags of low mountains rose out of dry earth and sand and the air was hot. The pale sky was masked in a yellow hue, like the sun was just too close and cast a glare over the ozone. A while later we came to a city ringed by a protective wall of sandstone, and it was toward this we rode. My clothes were changed. I was in mostly black, a loose robe belted round the waist and free at the legs, and boots with slightly pointed toes. My sword was different, too, its blade wider and curved. Mother was dressed similarly, and since she did not seem disturbed by the change I did not question her about it.

The city wall was in ruins. Great gashes had been torn in the sandstone, some all the way to the ground and thirty feet wide. Cracks riddled its surface. Entering the city unseen was a simple matter. Mother and I were dressed like the guardsman and soldiers who walked the streets without noticing the beggars and diseased at their feet, so we were left unmolested.

We came to the inner wall, and this, too, was wrecked with holes big enough to crawl through. "Battering rams," mother said. The palace sat within, but we did not go there. Instead we stopped at a simple building and

went inside.

The room was bare, an empty storage space with one window at the front next to the door. Mother sat against the far wall in deep concentration, the tips of her fingers pressed together before her face. "We'll wait until night," she said.

I went to the window and from here could see crumbling buildings, women in rags with swollen feet, and thin children sleeping in the shade of a broken wall. "This is the kingdom of my brother's father?"

"Yes," she answered and did not flinch from her concentration. "Keep your head down."

"I will."

It was difficult to think clearly. So much had happened, so strange and bewildering. Mother bringing me here, this city . . . it had a dream-like quality that was disconcerting, and I had trouble taking it all seriously. But when confronted with the unknown, I have found it easiest to just go with it, like riding out a storm at sea. If I could keep my head clear, not let myself get bogged down with the absurdity of it all, I was sure everything would eventually come together and make some sort of sense. This was my hope.

Night came; the air cooled. "Open the door," said mother. She had not moved since we arrived.

At first I thought we were leaving, but she remained seated on the other side of the room. I moved to the door cautiously, certain that there was someone waiting on the other side, for mother's tone sounded like an invitation. I opened the door a few inches, enough to see through, but saw no one. "Open it," said mother again.

I did, swung the door fully. A beggar lay in the doorway, his clothes dirty, with a hood pulled down over his head. He turned his head, and though he did not show it, I think he was startled. I said nothing.

He looked past me, at mother, surprised. "What are you doing here?" he spat. He entered the room and I closed the door behind him, taking a brief glance outside to see if we were noticed. He pushed his hood back to reveal a strong, mature face topped by a thin layer of orange spiked hair.

"I need you to do a favor for me," she said to him. Then, nodding towards me, "This is your brother, Hadrian."

He looked at me and laughed, a quick, "Ha." His eyes were wide with madness and his grin manic. When I held out my hand in greeting he ignored it.

"My brother . . ." he said to her, equal parts incredulous and annoyed.

"I need you to watch him for a little while, until I return."

"You're leaving? Now?" He was upset.

"There are matters that demand my attention elsewhere." She rose and crossed the room, then turned back and said, "Keep him safe and out of harm's way." Then she was gone.

At the window I could see no sign of where she went.

My brother leaned back, rubbed his hands through his hair in exasperation. His face pulled tight, he sprang forward suddenly, hurling the dagger at his side into the sandstone wall. The weapon was buried up to the hilt. Impressive.

"I take it you're not pleased with mother's behavior," I said to him.

"How could she just leave?" he yelled, "Now, when Graecia is in ruins and my father lies imprisoned by the Sexless Prince!"

"At least your father is alive."

"What happened to yours?" he asked nonchalantly, as if making light conversation.

I tried to match his tone. "He was assassinated."

"By who?"

"I don't know. Mother has gone to deal with the situation. She didn't want to let the trail grow cold."

"What does she suspect?"

"She didn't say."

Silence, then, in contemplation, of what I wasn't sure, perhaps damning mother for fixing him with the cumbersome chore of looking after me; I simply had nothing to say, until at last a question occurred to me.

"What is your name?" I asked.

"Bastian," said he.

I nodded; it was a good name. "Bastian of Graecia," I said aloud, trying out the sound of it.

"Bastian of Amber," he said sternly, and fixed his gaze to mine to make sure I would remember. Bastian of Amber . . . yes, that sounded

right.

We talked of the family for a time. What I knew of them, and what mother had told him. Bastian cautioned me to trust none of them. "Even mother?" I asked.

He thought about this. "I trust her," he said finally. "Or at least, I believe her most of the time. And watch out, especially for the redheads."

I looked at him, my glance resting on the flame color of his own hair. He grinned that maniacal grin of his.

I wondered at the state of Graecia, and was told the combined forces of the other city-states of the land had sacked the kingdom. All of them were unified by Arta, which, strange to my mind, was one of the weaker city-states. Odder still was the fact that Bastian's father had been trying to unify the separate city-states, himself. Arta had beat him to it. The Sexless Prince, heir to the throne of Arta, had stormed Graecia's palace and captured Bastian's father. Luckily, Bastian was without siblings, else they, too, would have shared his father's fate, or worse.

"So, Hadrian," he said, "Want to go out? I don't feel like waiting for Deirdre to come back before rescuing my father. Or I can find someplace safe for you."

"Mother did say to keep an eye on me."

Like a striking viper he took one quick, long stride towards me, his face inches from my own. "Don't threaten me," he hissed through a mock grin. It was a great effort to stand my ground, not give an inch, and keep my face composed. He was quite close to me.

He backed away at last and said, "Lose the red cape. It'll make you stand out."

I undid the clasp and let it fall to the floor.

"We'll need to get some soldier uniforms," he said.

"Just one," I pointed out, indicating my own costume.

"Two. You're wearing the uniform of Graecia."

We kept to the shadows, looked for guards in a pair, avoiding those in fours and eights. Bastian spied two and had me wait in the cover of darkness while he went ahead. I drew my strangely curved sword and felt the ground for a good sized rock. Finding one, I waited.

The guards walked toward me from the left. From the right, Bastian

stumbled down the road in his beggar clothes, coming to meet them. They encountered in front of me, the two guards grabbed him roughly between them.

"No beggars on the street after dark," said one.

"I'm no beggar," he said, then stuffed his fist into the guard's mouth, I expect he broke some teeth doing it.

I threw the rock across the street where it clattered loudly. When the second guard turned to look I jumped from the shadows and clubbed him in the back of the head with the pommel of my sword. Bastian thrust his dirk through the first guard's throat. He tried to call out, but choked on his own blood, then died. We hauled them into an empty building, where Bastian threw off his filthy clothes and donned the guard's uniform. I changed as well.

"Is he dead?" Bastian asked of the guard I hit.

"No. I didn't want to get blood on the uniform."

He grunted, then crushed the guard's windpipe under his foot.

"Let's go," he said.

*Wherein a strange world is discovered,
teaching us the true meaning of the
word "brother" . . .*

Bastian and I climbed the palace walls. Our infiltration was easy enough, but why we were there I never learned, for we left soon after. All we did was enter a bedroom where Bastian looked around. I suppose he was searching for his father, who had perhaps been left there, last he knew. Finding nothing, he must have decided that the Sexless Prince had imprisoned his father elsewhere. While at the bedroom window I saw that the guards had noticed our presence. However, we climbed back down and were away before they found us.

On horseback, we rode from the city-state of Graecia on our way to Arta, the home of the Sexless Prince. "Why is he called that?" I asked.

"I castrated him," he said simply. "I had visited Arta some years ago, where I slew the king and queen, and took his sister for my slave."

"Does she yet live?"

"No. She served me well, but I grew tired of her."

"How long did that last before you killed her?" I teased, "A week? A month?"

"About a year. And I didn't kill her. She died of poisoning while tasting my food."

"Good thing."

"What?"

"That it was she, instead of you."

"I don't know about that. I doubt the poison would have affected me."

"Strange that he would seek vengeance," I said with subtle sarcasm. Though I found myself unable to condemn my riding partner easily. Despite his callous words and volatile madness, he seemed a likable fellow.

I liked him even though he stranded me in shadow. It happened like this:

We were talking about Amber—what I knew, or rather, how little I knew. Bastian expressed surprise at my ignorance, and thought mother would have told me more to insure my safety. He then talked of shadows and realities, and mentioned something called The Pattern. And finally, the idea of actually going to Amber surfaced.

"I'm not sure how much more I should tell you," said Bastian. "If mother didn't say anything about it, she probably had good reason."

"She was probably in a hurry to find father's assassins."

"She would have made time."

"Maybe. Maybe not. Tell me, anyway."

"No."

"Then show me."

Bastian looked at me, fire in his eyes. "Show you?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?" he said, drawing out the sounds, and grinning.

"Yes."

"Do you really want to go to Amber?"

"Yes."

"No," he said suddenly, as if changing his mind. "She'll take you when she thinks you're ready. You're too young."

"How old were you?"

"Well," he shrugged, "I was younger than you."

"Okay, I understand. You just want to keep an edge. Hell, I'd feel threatened, too. It'll be easier for you to keep an eye on me if you have this power and I don't. That, and the fact that you're the older brother, should be plenty to keep me in line."

"I'm not threatened." He was starting to boil.

"Then show me."

"No."

"All right, never mind. I'm sure the road to Amber is rough anyway. Probably too rough for you to take someone as inexperienced as me. I'd better wait until mother gets back. She'll be able to handle it."

"It's not that rough."

"No, that's okay, we wouldn't want to risk anything. Besides, mother will be very cross if something bad happens to me on the way. We'd better play it safe."

"No," he spoke sharp and clipped, "We can go. You want to go? Let's go. Let's go to Amber."

"Okay," I said, satisfied.

He led me through shadow where the sky burned red and the air was scorched and flames burst from the ground in jets. My horse spooked, and I lost ground on Bastian. He turned a corner ahead and was gone. Flames sprouted from the dry earth, and each time my horse grew more nervous. It was all I could do to calm her down. Empty plains of desolation surrounded me on three sides. Cliffs of red rock loomed to my left; I stood at the bottom of a chasm and decided to look for Bastian deeper within the rocks. It was the only place he could have hid. The wide chasm took many turns, and in the first half hour didn't find him. I decided to find a shady place and wait.

The land was vast, and he could have gone anywhere. There was no point wasting energy looking for him, and I knew he'd be back because he wouldn't want to explain to mother what happened. He still respected

her too much to lie to her. If I went off on my own there was a chance he wouldn't be able to find me, and I didn't see any cities or signs of civilization anywhere on the horizon. Nowhere to go.

He returned three hours later with food and drink. My punishment was over. "Be wary of him, but trust him," I said to no one in particular as I gave water to my horse. My face was reddened and my skin tight from the sun, but I was not angry.

"I don't like being baited," he said in warning.

"Then don't be baited," I answered.

"I wasn't. And never threaten me with what our mother might do, again. Have a drink."

I took a sip of wine, and thought carefully before speaking next. "I don't mean this as a threat. A man should not be governed by the commands of others, but make choices based on his own desires."

"It is my desire to do as our mother wishes," was his answer.

He left the uneaten food behind. Around the next corner found two fresh horses, a black and a red. He took the black. "We're going to Arta," he said, then rode off swiftly. I followed, and we were soon under the cool branches of the forest outside Arta's walls.

One last thing—I found the shadow world Bastian stranded me in was magnificent.

Wherein the quest is completed . . .

Like our assault on Graecia's occupied palace, our infiltration of Arta was supremely easy. At the city's edge, Bastian pulled two black outfits from his horse's saddlebags. We put these on and made our way into the city interior.

Having no clue as to precisely where the Sexless Prince had imprisoned Bastian's father, whom I finally learned was named Thallos, we mugged a soldier captain. Bastian told him we were mercenaries, paid to deliver the former King of Graecia to an enemy, in return for gold. He then took the captain's sword, and with his hands, snapped the blade off

three inches from the guard. Confronted with such strength, the captain agreed to lead us to Thallos's cell in the deepest, darkest hole in the Prince's dungeons.

I don't want to detail the threats and counter-threats between the three of us, the verbal maneuverings and assurances, the bargaining, and the descent into the castle; it was all very base and not worth retelling in detail. I want to say this, however: Bastian seemed a god among mortals. How else do I explain our travels together? We were unchecked at every turn, there was no opposition capable of stopping us, we walked into the enemy's den with impunity and candor, and walked out again unscathed, unmolested, unchallenged. It seemed demeaning, in a way, that we go through the motions of sneaking about like assassins or spies. But then, I thought of it like a grand play, and we were merely playing roles designed for our own amusement and delight. We lent ourselves the suspension of disbelief that enabled us to carry out our actions with a quiet sense of tension, as if there were actual danger. Bastian seemed more accustomed to it than I, for he bore a look of genuine concern on his face. I found it difficult to suppress a smile while lurking in the shadows.

Deep in the dungeons, Bastian entered the black cell while I stood guard over our reluctant guide. Bastian emerged carrying a mutilated man, thin and wasted from malnutrition, and scarred by torture, his father, Thallos. His left arm was missing, as was his left leg and half his right to the knee. I wondered, then, which father's fate was kinder.

Bastian handed his father to me. He was so incredibly light, like a child. I cradled him gently in both arms. Then Bastian reached inside his black robe and pulled out a claymore, a huge battle-sword with a blade at least five feet long. Understand that such a thing was impossible. He looked at our guide thoughtfully, then said, "I am Bastian, Prince of Graecia, and this is my father."

"The tales said you were dead," said the soldier.

"They were wrong. What is your name?"

"Argus," he said. "Captain Argus."

"Well, Captain Argus," said Bastian, "After I bring my father to safety I plan to return with an invincible army and destroy all of Arta. I give you the choice of being locked in this cell, or coming with me and joining

the winning side. We could use your knowledge of Arta's defenses and military."

"I don't like to think what the Prince's punishment would be when he found me locked up here. And you still have to get out of here carrying your father's body."

So it was decided.

I could not believe we had come so far without Captian Argus raising an alarm. There were just the two of us, and we passed several patrols of guards on our way here. Bastian must have impressed him more than I thought, and I suppose I was becoming accustomed to his superhuman feats.

Bastian returned his great sword to the folds of his robe, where it somehow disappeared. To look at him, there were no signs that he carried any weapon; yet there was no doubt among us that he could bring it forth again, if need arose.

We wrapped Thallos in a cloak, to cover both his identity and his deformities, which would arouse suspicion. The job of bearing his unwhole body was mine, leaving Bastian free to deal with any problems we encountered. There were none, however, and we were soon out of the city.

Bastian and I mounted our horses, but Argus stood standing at the gates of Arta. "I am not going with you. I have family here and do not want to see them killed when you return."

Bastian nodded his assent. "Warn any you care to. Tell them to leave the city if they wish to live. There will be no defense against my army."

We rode on, and once Argus disappeared from sight, we passed into shadow.

"Neat trick with the sword," I said. "Is that part of the legacy?"

"No."

"What then?"

He shrugged and grinned. "Just a trick."



*Wherein vengeance is finally taken
and a kind of promise made . . .*

We came to a lush valley surrounded by high mountain peaks. Passes through the mountains were plentiful, but there were few trees. In the valley was a city of tall stone buildings with flat roofs. Enormous birds soared in the sky, big enough to hold a horse in each talon. Bastian called the place Gor.

A man saluted Bastian as we approached. "Are the Tarnsmen ready?" asked Bastian.

"Yes, my lord. Three hundred Tarn have been summoned thus far."

"Good. We march in a week."

Bastian brought Thallo to the care of physicians. They did what they could for him, cleaned his infected wounds, and cut the sharp barb imbedded in his left shoulder like a meat hook which he had been strung up by in the dungeons. But he was still gravely injured and though he did not die in the following week, neither did he regain consciousness.

After seeing that his father tended, Bastian came to me. "You'll be safe here while I'm gone." I must have given him an inquisitive, confused look, because he added, "Unless you want to come along . . ."

"If the choice is mine, I'd like to go," I replied. My reasons were two-fold. First, it occurred to me that Bastian, having completed his revenge, might decide to forsake me, even though this would anger mother. The inner turmoil caused by the torture of his father could be enough to send him wandering in shadow, brooding, and I did not relish the prospect of being left behind again in shadow, even though Gor seemed rather hospitable compared to the last fiery realm. His father was here, so in all likelihood Bastian would return, but I did not want to chance it. Second, I liked seeing him in action. And if he had any new tricks I wanted to be there to see them.

"In that case, there are some things I have to teach you . . ." he said.

The Tarn, I soon learned, were the great birds in the sky. And the Tarnsmen rode them, five to a bird. The beasts were ferocious and deadly. Only through the use of an electric prod could the riders command their mounts. The key, I was told, was to make the bird fear you. If the Tarn feared you, it would respect you, and obey your commands. The birds were not unlike men in that regard.

I spent the week learning to ride. It was a sensation I'll not soon

forget, much like standing at the rail of a ship as it cut the waves under full sail, the wind so hard on your face you had to squint or go blind: so it was riding the Tarn. On a Tarn though you did not have a large steady deck below your feet, just sky all around and the earth below, rising to meet you in a power dive, then falling away as you banked and climbed. Exhilarating.

Bastian had arranged for this little war party during those three hours I was stranded in shadow. The people here worked fast and a mere day later, fifteen hundred men waited to march against Arta, fully prepped for battle.

Bastian and I discussed the coming invasion.

"I want to utterly destroy that shadow. To leave nothing behind," he said.

"Why bother?" asked I.

"I don't want any loose ends. I left loose ends before, letting the Sexless Prince live, and look what happened."

"But if you never intend to return there again . . .? How can they trouble you?"

"I am not going for battle. I go for destruction. I want nothing left of that place."

I did not fully understand him. It seemed a lot of trouble to go through for something that was ultimately pointless. If what Bastian had told me about shadows were true, then whether they live or die, what could it matter in any practical sense? It seemed like burning down your house after a hurricane hit and you've decided to move to another country.

Possibly, I thought, the situation was more akin to amputation. The shadow was diseased, and to know that it lingered, caused more pain. Perhaps Bastian sought to excise the poison of Arta before it ate away at him and weakened him. Or perhaps he was just throwing a tantrum to get all the anger out of his system. By week's end two hundred more Tarn and a thousand more warriors arrived. I was well practiced in Tarnmastery by then. We were ready.

Arta was doomed.

The Tarnsmen swept down upon Arta mercilessly. Apparently, Captain Argus had not told the army of our coming, for we took them by surprise. Nothing they had could stand against our forces. We left the city in

ruins, more devastated than Graecia had been - for no building stood at battle's end. In the middle of the barrage, Bastian made his way into the palace in search of the Sexless Prince, to deliver his revenge personally. I, of course, followed, eager to see Bastian's nemesis.

With a powerful blow he crushed the doors of the Prince's throne room. A man's voice called out, though it was feminine, with an authority too weak to take seriously, "Who dares attack my city!"

Bastian entered, his hands balled into tight fists, and I saw the Sexless Prince as he turned to face Bastian. He was a young man with a tall, slender face, framed by long, light brown hair, thin and silky, combed straight back. His thin lips were bent in a scowl and he had narrow eyes, creased in anger. He wore a light robe, white, with many folds down his arms, open in front. Beneath was an orange shirt, dull and plain.

"You!" he said. There was fire in his voice, like hot coals bursting to flame. "So, the Demonchild returns."

Bastian strode forward and grabbed the Sexless Prince by the collar and heaved him off the floor. "Who are you working with?" he hissed. "Who's helping you?"

"Everyone," said the Prince. "They all wanted you dead. You and your weak, cowering father."

Bastian started to shake, and his face tightened. Then he released his tensed muscles and hurled the Sexless Prince across the room with all his strength. I was reminded of the first time we met, and the moment after mother left us together in that deserted building in Graecia, of Bastian's fury, ending with his dagger buried up to the hilt in the sandstone wall. The Sexless Prince ended up much the same way, though his head proved to be far less piercing than a knife.

After Arta we laid waste to the remaining city-states which had desecrated Graecia, five all told. At the third, we came upon a man crouched next to a woman pinned under rock. Bastian walked down the street slaying without prejudice, but stopped suddenly upon seeing this. The man was Captain Argus, the woman his wife.

Bastian paused for the briefest of moments, and it seemed a great effort to stay his hand. He spoke tersely to Argus, "Say nothing." Then he easily lifted the rock off the woman. "That's for Thallos." And he turned

away.

"She's dead," said Argus weakly.

"If you have any more family, run," said Bastian, and he was off again, hacking with his mighty sword.

"Run to Graecia," I said as I ran after Bastian.

After that the novelty wore off. I was content to watch from a nearby cliff as the Tarnsmen went to work on the last two cities. Bastian's reign of terror concluded, we returned to Gor with only five hundred casualties for their ten thousand. The campaign had taken about three weeks, and Thallos was no better. We did not stay, but were off again, though with far less urgency than any time before.

"It's time to rest," said Bastian. "We're going someplace safe where you can wait for Deirdre to come for you."

"What place is this?"

"Brazasia."

It was truly delightful. Long before we saw the city, I felt the warm breeze of comfort. The clouds parted as we approached, revealing a sky of grey with a slice of azure. The air was fragrant and music echoed like laughter. In the distance was a light, like a candle in the window of an inviting inn, and we rode towards it. The people were exotic, with sharp features and deeply tanned skin, all smiling. It was paradise.

Bastian left me on my own, and for the first time since leaving Begma I felt confident in my independence. He was taking Thallos to some other place, some other shadow, where the hospitals were better, so Thallos would have a decent chance of recovery.

I was given plenty of time to reflect upon recent events. Our annihilation of Arta and its allies only confirmed my prior conception of Bastian, and any others like him, all our relatives, as god-figures. These "shadow worlds" were playgrounds. Now I understood what mother said about Amber being the only "real world." How seriously could we consider the fates of these shadows, when they were ridiculously easy to manipulate, and when there were as many of them as we could imagine? We walk through them as playwright, director, and lead role.

Thank you, Bastian, for showing me so much. Much more than you intended to, I think. You have enlightened me through example and

illustration. If I knew you better I might think the whole affair of your father's capture and your revenge on Arta to be a plot of your own device for the express purpose of demonstrating to me the nature of the universe. However, I don't think you that devious. If anything you seem to me a very straightforward man. Direct like a tidal wave. Subtle as a tornado. These things comfort me, for while you are a fearful sight to behold on the wrong side of swordpoint, you at least have the courtesy to attack from the front.

I wonder how I can repay you for this education. It seems to me that what you truly need, what would make your raw power worth possessing, is a challenge worthy of you.

Perhaps someday I can arrange something.

*Wherein a prophesy is sung
and a traveler returns . . .*

My stay in Brazasia was intoxicating. A celebration toured the streets every night, a mob of the happiest people I've ever seen twirled and ran barefoot to the beaches. The bands beat rhythmic pulses through the sand on the shores, and we danced until dawn under silver moonlight. The days were endless feasts of tantalizing tastes. And there was racing—horses, sailboats, wind surfers—with a beautiful girl at every finish line.

And there was Talia.

She was a young woman, arrow-straight black hair to her waist, with almond shaped emeralds for eyes. Her skin was the rich color of mocha, but sweeter than any chocolate I've tasted. She was there on the beach as I pulled my wind surfer onto shore, the surf lapping at her feet. She congratulated me on my victory over the former champion. Or perhaps congratulated is not the right word. By her response you'd think winning a wind surfing race made a man king; she made me feel like one.

We went to a tavern and got silly. While listening to one of the bands I made the mistake of mentioning that I had upon occasion tried my

hand at song writing. Talia quickly evoked a promise from me to write a song for the gig that night. I tried to get out of it, but she said that was the way of things in Brazasia. Everyone sings. She looked me in the eye and smiled that native smile and I just couldn't let her down. While feeling the beat keep time with the twenty-four ounces of drink in my veins I composed a brief tune and committed it to memory. I wished Bastian had been back by then. I would have liked him to hear it, since he was the source of my inspiration. The song was titled ***Baal***:

*When the temper of the sky is like the storm,
and the beating of your heart keeps you warm,
When the fires in the night burn 'til morn,
then you're walking into Baal, you're coming home.*

*Light a torch on the rampart to show me you've been there
forget all your demons and all your hate.
And howl to the heavens, let loose all your anger
for here is the furnace to melt your fate.*

*Your solace is wrapped in a woman of crimson
her hair blazed like roses in wild bloom.
An inferno to cool you and soothe you in satin
the heat of your passion burns away the gloom.*

*The mountains glow red as the blood rushing fast
through your body so hot for a cooling kiss.
Your sweat turns to steam in the forge that is heaven
where white searing coals like a whisper hiss.*

*When the land behind is cast in scarlet pall
and the shadows at your feet stretch out tall
When you pass beyond the flame enshrouded wall
then you're walking far from home, you're leaving Baal.*

That night on the beach the song went over like gangbusters. I'm sure they were just being polite.

We went on like this for days. It seemed like no one slept. I know I didn't. The music and food were like drugs, keeping us energized and vibrant. It was like having a really good day, which happened to last a whole week, and the sun would rise and set every now and then, just to show you how beautiful it was. But the party wound down eventually. Talia and I retired to a room in some house—I don't think the owner was home at the time. Everyone else did the same. Like a dying fire, we settled down to smolder, wrapped in each other's heat, until darkness folded around us and we slept.

I woke to a loud knock on the door. Sunlight lit the room softly, the beam diffused through the filmy curtain over the window. Talia stirred slightly and I was glad the noise did not awaken her. By the booming sound, the knock could only have been made by the massive muscles of my brother Bastian, recently returned with Thallos, hopefully fully recovered from his ordeal.

I robed and opened the door quietly.

I was wrong. It was not Bastian's hulking form which stood before me silhouetted by the light streaming through the front door, but rather the shapely form of mother, come for me at last.

"Where's Bastian?" she asked by way of greeting.

I entered the hallway and closed the door behind me, not wanting to wake Talia. "He's gone shadowwalking."

"He left you?" She showed the hint of ire.

"He had no choice. We rescued Thallos from the Sexless Prince, but he was so wounded that Bastian had to take him somewhere that could help him better."

"We?"

"Bastian and I."

"He took you on a raid into Arta?!" She grew more intense.

"Well . . . he wanted to rescue his father . . ."

"Did I mistake myself? Were not my last instructions, keep him safe and out of harm's way?"

"I believe so."

"Walking into enemy strongholds is not out of harm's way!"

"Mother, please, there are people sleeping."

"Let them wake! You have knowingly disobeyed me, you and your brother. Bastian I shall deal with later. You, I trust, will not let such a thing happen again."

"Of course not, mother." I decided not to tell her of the razing of Arta and the other city-states, as they, too, would fall into the not-out-of-harm's-way category.

She calmed quickly, though her expression was still dark, and she spoke evenly. "It is time to go."

I reached for the doorknob, but found her hand instead. "My things . . ." I said.

"You won't need them."

"May I say good-bye to Talia?"

"No. It is time to go, now." Still holding my hand, she led me out the front door into the afternoon. There were two horses there; a black stallion much like Bastian's but leaner, and a grey mare. Mother mounted the black, and as I looked up at her hard gaze, her shoulders straight, and her head held strongly, she reminded me very much of Bastian.

We rode out of Brazasia. We rode out of paradise.

"Where are we going?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"To Amber."

"To claim my legacy?"

She nodded, and rode on.

My clothes had changed along the way. I was clad in my Begma clothes, the clothes I had worn when I had last rode from there with mother. I had no sword, though. I could not help but think this was a purposeful omission, to make me more dependent on mother's protection, so I would not have even the inkling of parting ways.

Mother was oddly silent during our journey, as if speaking would allow some secret to fall from her tongue by accident. Watching her, eyes set determinedly forward, I was overwhelmed by that same sense I felt when the Housemaster entered my room at the beginning of all this. It was a sense of foreboding, of thunderclouds over a small sailboat, of being smothered by blankets in July; a sense that told me my father was dead

before the Housemaster spoke the words. But now, I had only the feeling, and lacked the knowledge. I was frightened, because I had no base to place my dread upon.

I struggled with the daring required to broach a sensitive subject, and found that not knowing was worse than any breach of etiquette. "Mother!" I yelled over the beating hooves, and tried to think of a pleasant phrasing. "What did you discover about father's death?" Oh well.

She reined in her stallion. I did the same and we looked at each other for several moments. I tried to keep a neutral expression, betraying neither worry, nor misplaced casualness. She looked to be mulling over various responses . . . or lies.

She decided and said, "It involves people you have not met, nor have even heard of. You were right about Lord Heward; it was a clumsy frame, those behind the deed used him to affect their ends. But Lord Heward is no more responsible for your father's death than the patch of grass upon which the true assassin stepped on his way to your father's bedchamber. Connected, yes. Aware, no."

"But who's behind it?" I persisted.

"Their names would be meaningless. And to describe them pointless, for you will never see them."

"Why not?"

"Because by the time you have acquired the skill to confront them in their own land, this will all be over."

"You are not through with this, then?"

"No. There are yet payments to be meted out."

She urged her steed forward, ready to set off again, but I held my ground. She went a few steps before noticing I had not followed. When she turned to look at me I said, "I have a vengeance of my own that needs settling."

"You have a life that needs living."

"He was my father," I said as a way of concluding my argument. I prayed she would not continue to debate me for my excuses were all used up.

With neither assent nor refusal she spurred her mount onward, and I was left to wonder who won. I followed, keeping behind her after that.

Why bother riding side by side? There was nothing left to say.

*Wherein the legacy is finally claimed
and the gift is not entirely what it
seemed to be . . .*

As a matter of simple fact Dierdre stated, "This is Arden Forest, these trees mark the boundary of Amber." In my time in the Royal Navy I heard about Arden, but never set foot within, for my duties kept me bound to the shore side of the city. But I remembered the tales of dire wolves and a gleaming nightmare of a monster, and of the man who was their master.

"Will we meet Julian?" I asked. He was one of mother's half-brothers, younger than she, whom she never spoke particularly well of. I believe the words she used were "a petty man with too much arrogance." I thought it an odd description, mainly for the notion that it was possible for a man to have the right amount of arrogance.

"Not if we can help it," she replied.

She was watchful and rode carefully. It was just after dusk, and there was no moon. At one point, I thought I heard men talking in the distance, and I saw the glow of a campfire. Mother motioned for silence and we skirted them unseen.

Miles later the forest broke and before us was Castle Amber. Even in this darkness its five-walled shade stood out against the inky blackness of night. We encountered not a soul as we entered the castle.

The halls were not lit, which mother seemed to prefer. She led me through a large oaken door and down a twisted stone staircase. She kept my hand, to know where I was, for it was so dark we could not see each other. Mother strode on confidently, as if she had made this trip many times before, perhaps in similar circumstances. Then the floor leveled out and I reasoned we had come to the foot of the stairs. My hand became free, let go.

"Mother . . . ?" I whispered into the darkness.

"Shush," she said gently, "Give me a moment."

A soft glow appeared, grew into a lit lantern in mother's hand.

"The hard part's over, I suppose," I said, a little in jest.

"No. That's still to come." She was very serious.

There was no one here, in this dusty corridor of rock beneath the earth. We were free to go on as we pleased. Mother finally came to a simple wooden door, and here she took a deep breath as if preparing to scale a battlement. There was nothing peculiar about the door, however. It was plain and harmless looking. For this reason I became nervous.

She opened the door and led me inside. Nearly filling the floor of this large room glittered a marvelous piece of artistry; a painting of a sort, but it sparkled and sparkled, like a thing alive. It was brilliant, wondrous, frightening, and beautiful. And there was something inside of me that called out to it, that drew me towards it like a thirsting man to crystal clear water. I could feel the glow of it on my face. "What . . .," I said weakly, for I could not move my lips so paralyzed with fascination was I.

"This is the Pattern. This is your birthright and legacy."

The design was ovular, made of arcs and lines, which spiraled inward to a centerpoint. I tried to follow the line with my eyes, but the image deceived and I was not able to keep focused on it. "What do I do?" I asked, eager for whatever it was.

"You walk it."

"That's all? What's the trick?"

"The trick is that it's not as easy as it looks. Make no mistake about the severity of what you are about to undertake. The Pattern can kill, Hadrian. Do you understand? You are about to make a life and death choice."

"Bastian did this?"

"Yes."

"Then so can I."

"Listen, now, for what I tell you is very important. Do not walk off the path, and do not stop. Either will kill you. Along the way you will encounter three veils. These are the points of most resistance. You must press on through each one no matter how difficult it becomes, and each is more difficult than the last. Finally, when you reach the center, wait for me. Do nothing. Absolutely nothing."

I looked out to the Pattern and saw within its shapes the power to command the universe.

"I'm ready," I said.

"Then go. And Hadrian . . . good luck."

"Thank you, mother." I walked to the edge of the path, the starting point positioned directly in line with the door.

I took my first step.

Sparks shot up around my feet and my legs tingled.

"The sparks will not harm you!" called mother. "Ignore them!"

I made my way around the outermost curve of the ellipse taking my time. I felt no danger in going slow, so long as I kept moving. Images flashed through my imagination, remembrances of a childhood too fleeting. There, running too fast for my own legs, a toddler tumbling head over end through a field of milkweed ... and there, suspicious glares from the other children when I told them the White Lady was just someone our parents made up to explain snowfalls ... there, fidgeting while tutors repeated the same lessons endlessly. The path bent back upon itself, and I encountered a great pressure against my chest, the First Veil. It was like walking through a room stuffed with pillows—spiny pillows. In that moment the flash of images froze, a single vision of mother stretched in timelessness, bathed in the moonlight and watching me when she thought I was asleep, a smile of portent spread across her face. Then the way became easier, the floodgate of memories loose again, and I left the First Veil behind.

The path bent and curved many times, rarely keeping one arc before shifting to another. Swords flashed in my mind ... father's face flushed with pride, his rapier dancing arcs in front of me ... his mouth formed the word "destiny." I made a few laps around the Pattern and then the path took a kind of U-turn again, where I walked into a wall of needles, the Second Veil. I felt my whole body slowly falling asleep, as I lost sensation in my limbs. Walking was tricky because I was not quite aware of my feet, and had only my strength of will to convince me that I was indeed moving forward. That and the fact that I had not exploded in flames.

Then it was over, as quickly as it had begun, and I continued around a long arc bringing me almost three-quarters of the way around. Sea spray washed amidship on the Peregrin ... the deck slick with water ... wind sharp as knives ... salutes for officers and swords for brigands. Then three shorter

arcs, about half the ellipse each as they wound inward towards the center. But that was simply a sham, as a series of sharp angles brought me outwards again, then around to a zig-zag of angles that tried to make me lost. Then finally, I was on the path straight to the center.

So excited was I that I forgot about the Third Veil. It hit me like the trunk of an oak tree. A silver cross in a silver circle burned behind my eyes, as something hot and sticky and red flowed across it. I think I paused for the briefest moment to regain my footing, for I felt a sharp pain shoot up through each heel. Luckily, that got me going again as I waded through what seemed an impossible obstacle. I turned all my focus inward, and directed every thought I had to my right foot, commanding it to take a step, then to my left to do the same. I lost all awareness of my surroundings save my two feet, knowing only that each had to gain ground on the other.

Like surfacing from a great ocean depth, I was through.

I stood in the center of the Pattern.

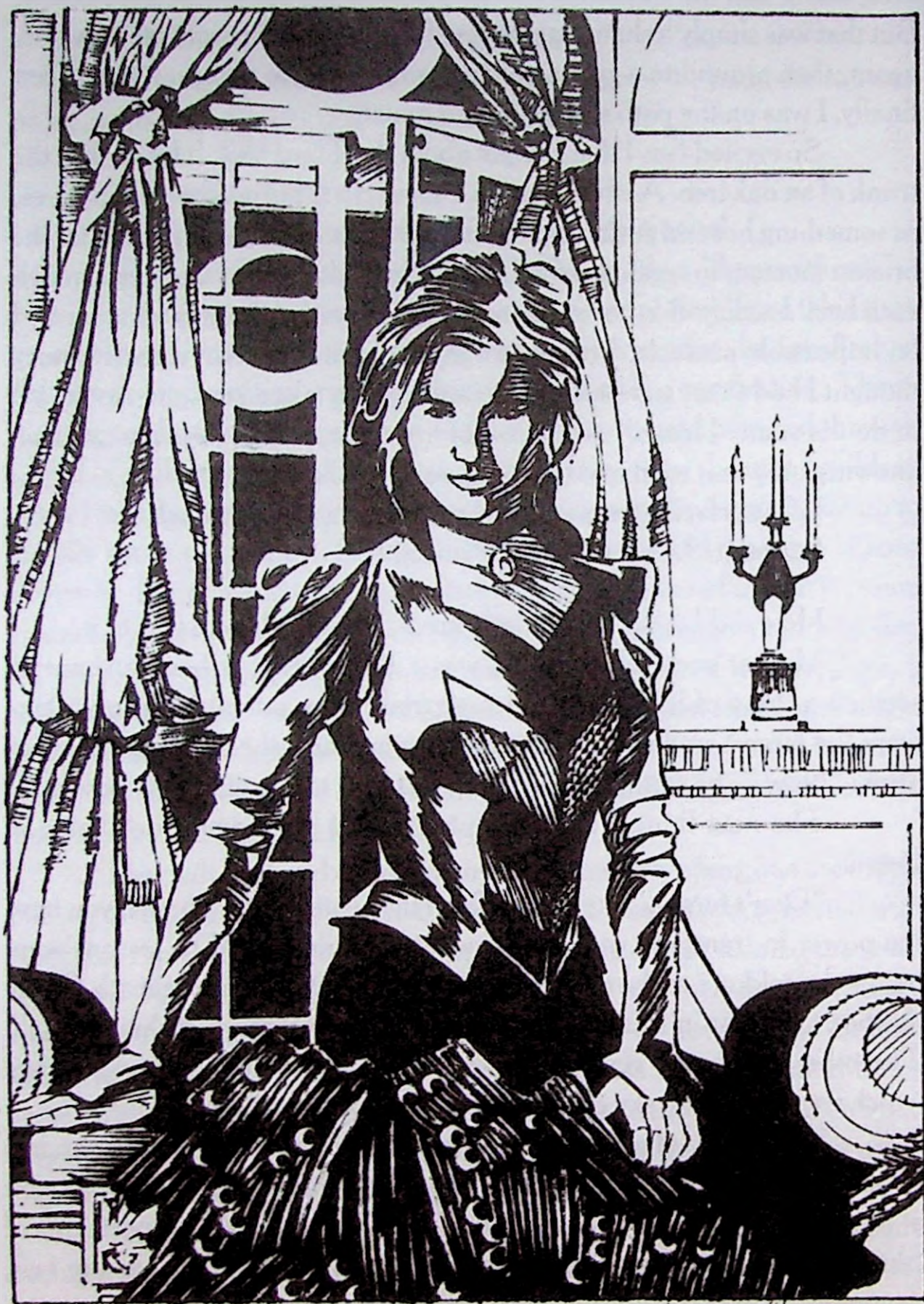
How did I feel? I felt bloody great. That's all there was to it.

Mother soon joined me. I was a bit jealous, as her Patternwalk seemed a thing of idle necessity compared to the ordeal I endured. She wore the largest smile I have ever seen on her, and she crushed me in her arms. "Now," she said, "I must teach you how to use your new power."

The next thing I knew we were in my bedroom at our home in Begma.

"Don't forget," she said, "From the center of the Pattern you have the power to transport yourself anywhere you desire." The lessons went on, as she told me of the other "reflections" of the Pattern beneath Castle Amber. One was in Rebma, an underwater mirror image of Amber itself. The other was in the sky-realm of Tir-na Nog'th, another mirror image which was cast in the sky during the light of the full moon.

The details of my study became more tedious thereafter. Exercises in concentration and visualization, among other things. We spent quite a bit of time in shadow, until she was sure that I had mastered the rudiments of Shadowwalking, the slow, safe kind of travel; and Hellriding, the fast, dangerous kind.



DIETHE

MICHAEL KRAMER

Eventually, Mother grew eager to get back on the trail of father's killers. So eager, it seemed, that she went off in the middle of the night while I slept. I found a letter in the morning:

Dearest Hadrian,

I know what you must be feeling right now. Betrayal. Helplessness. A yearning need to do something useful. Please understand, I did not teach you all that I did in the past

weeks just to see you dead like your father. I intend for you and your brother to live. It's not easy to show, but I love you both. And if I appear cruel or selfish at times it is because I do not wish to see either of you scarred by the harshness of our world.

There are terrible things out here, but ignorance is a kind of bliss. Use it as a shield. Do not look under rocks or down rabbit holes, and you'll stay safe.

I wish you the best in the world. And with the power you now possess, the best is within your grasp.

Be well, my son.

Your Loving Mother

It did not make me feel a bit better.

I needed an end to the mystery surrounding father's murder, and discovered the only thing that kept me from cracking was the thought that mother would return and explain the madness. Even without revenge, an explanation would have been enough. I didn't have even that. And I had not the foggiest clue how to start an investigation myself. Visiting Lord Heward was pointless; his involvement was minuscule, at best. Most likely, he had no idea what transpired around him. I simply did not have the means, the experience or the connections.

So I did the next best thing. I filed the story away somewhere deep, where I hopefully would not be tempted to peek at it every now and then, for that would only renew my frustration. But where I could find it if I ever came upon the means to act on it.

I folded the note and tucked it away next to the black dagger which killed father. These were my parents: absent good-byes and treacherous blades. I was sick of them, and cursed my birth into this family. The world was cleaner when I knew nothing of Shadows and Patterns—simpler, yet more worth living. It took time to accept my fate finally. The bitterness was sweet, fresh, and not easily forgotten. But with each coming day, each new sight, I came to be grateful for my new abilities and the opportunities they opened. Whether this all would come out for the better or worse, only time will tell. And as I understand, time is no great factor for Children of the Blood.

I wonder, when the end finally comes, will I regret the death of young, innocent Hadrian, son of Count Bronson of Begma? Or will I count myself blessed and proud to be called Hadrian, Prince of Amber?



epilogue

*In which time passes swiftly
and a prophesy is fulfilled . .*

In case you're wondering, I didn't try to find Bastian again; it would be a very long time before I ever returned to Brazasia. Perhaps it was some of mother's cruelty in my genes. I missed Talia, but it had been so long that I doubted she was the same. Thing is, when Bastian and I first met, he seemed such a figure of legend I was awe-struck. I wanted some time to rise to his level, so that the next time we met I could look him in the eye and not

gaze in wonder. Despite that, I missed not being in Brazasia when Bastian returned. I would have liked to have seen his reaction to my unexplained absence. Would there be worried concern for a younger brother, possibly in danger? Panic for what mother would say to him when she found out he had lost me? Relief that he was rid of me at last? Or a shrug of indifference? I'll have to ask him about it when I see him next. I hope he remembers.

I adventured in shadow for a time, to get the feel of the myriad wonders of any world. Been on a polar exhibition, did some ocean archeology, went spelunking and drilled for oil, worked as a logger and in a quarry. Participated in a few World Wars (and a whole slew of smaller battles involving various cultures), lived through a plague or two, and studied under various spiritual gurus. Crashed a Hollywood party once. Built a skyscraper, hydro-electric dam, steppe pyramid, pagan monument, and a very big wall. Dug a canal. Whenever I could, I'd ride something; horse, bicycle, hang-glider, stock car, chariot, dog sled, kayak, glider, F-16, Harley Davidson, skateboard, wind surfer, speedboat, whatever.

During one jaunt through Shadow Earth, I visited a thoroughbred racetrack named Churchill Downs and fell in love with one of the racehorses. His name was Cinder, a tall, sleek stallion of a dark red color, with powerful legs and a long snout. He came in last place, not for lack of speed, he just didn't want to go where the jockey steered him. He had been racing for about a year, won about as much as he lost, which was why I got him for a good price. The owner was happy to let him go as he found Cinder too spirited for regular racing, too much a victim of moods. He can barely stand in one place for a full half-minute without shifting his hooves. But he loves Hellriding—a consequence of his youth and energy, I think. Strange thing about Cinder: he never grew old, even after a decade passed, he was still the same young stallion I first bought.

Then, after several dozen years of meandering I decided it was time to try my hand at some more inventive shadow-work. I hellrode away from Amber as far as I could, until the ground flowed easily under Cinder's hooves and my thoughts were like a canvas and my mind the brush to paint a scene of my desire. And my desire burned hot with anticipation fueled by fiery adrenaline. I was intoxicated as I had never been, except for the time when I walked the Pattern beneath Castle Amber.

Here it was the same.

My blood flowed quick like the shaping landscape, my birthright sculpting the world to my vision. Flame erupted from the ground and the sky burned red like coals in a smithing forge. Mountains rose soft and steaming from featureless plains and the air wavered before my wide eyes.

As I rode on I came to the first city, its people tall and slender with tight, red skin, narrow eyes and wide, thin mouths. Two sentries in black armor, wicked lances in their hands, saluted as I approached. They raised strong hands, palms open downward, to the tips of their orange plumed helmets. Above the gate was written a name in large bold letters carved into the mighty rock. I smiled, for it was as I had desired.

The name was Baal, and this world was mine.

The Lords of Chaos Victorious is a campaign run by Chris Thomas, assisted by Jeff Skilton. This adventure was the very beginning of K. Michael's first ever Amber game, and he'd like it noted that this diary is 96% verbatim. He thinks that's pretty cool. Bastain was the only other PC in this scenario, though he acted a lot like a GM sometimes. **K. Michael Thomas** thinks that's pretty cool, too. He also rides motorcycles, plays frisbee, and sometimes likes to play characters named Hadrian in other roleplaying games and pretend they're shadow reflections of this one.

Nothing Is Ever Simple

By Elizabeth S. Ray Trumitch

Liz Trumitch plays Jennastasia, a young character in George Gitari's ongoing ACUS campaign, *In The Dark*.

Editor's Note: The words italicized in the manuscript below are the nearest English to the untranslatable Thari used in the original.

I drew a breath of air, which smelled richly of earth, a familiar scent I've never been far from. He walked a few steps ahead to my right, while I stuck close to the inner wall. He'd decided to drop the attitude and be my father. I was comforted. I hated nothing more than having disagreements with him, and we'd shared too many recently. "As close as I've been able to get would be the door. What little I know mainly came from you and Auric." I answered. My few days in Amber had proven Auric to be a trustworthy older brother, but just like father, I had to push him to get the meat of an explanation. "He made the point that I should not attempt to stop once started, and that I should not deviate from the path. Everyone seems to think having someone teach me its use would be smarter than any early attempts on my part to travel on my own. I know what you showed me; that I should be able to use it to change reality outside of Amber. What else do I need to know?"

He walked on for a few paces, before drawing a deep breath. "When we get there you will need to take some time to just be near it. That is the

least of the concerns. More important is your approach to the situation in your mind, and your emotional state.

"Right now it is important to only concentrate on the task of the walk. You seem to be harboring some misguided notions that must be realigned before you touch the Pattern. Do not bother with what you will do, or learn, with it afterward. However, saying 'teach me its use' is not an advisable way to think about what the Pattern *is/does*. It does not have a use, or uses. It is used. Although linguistically these are synonymous, metaphilosophically they contain significant differences for the *speaker/thinker*. I will try to make those differences and their importance clearer as we go. Now, more than ever, you must ask any and all questions in as many ways as necessary until you truly understand the answers." He was speaking in an archaic accent, and I felt a sense of ritual in what he was saying. I wondered if this was how his father had led him down the stairs for his walk.

"Before we address that more thoroughly, understand that what I showed you is meaningless until you actually reach the center. Before then, what you might be able to do later, and what you have become familiar with before, will only hinder your progress. With the Pattern, you must never stop once you have begun. You will most dearly desire to, with all that you could possibly be, but to stop on that path is to stop on all paths. I can only hope Auric was able to convey even a fraction of the importance of this.

"Which brings me back to your mental approach. Whether he literally said 'should not attempt to stop', or you are paraphrasing is of little import at this point. The fact that you *said/thought* it that way needs be curtailed. You will not need to 'attempt' to stop. Stopping will be the easiest thing to do. You will need to fight that impulse. To say 'should not attempt to stop' is to imply you will be able to choose something that is not really a choice," he told me. I wanted to assure him I wasn't suicidal, but he continued. "I know you have many questions. Focus on the ones regarding the Pattern and do not try to ask them all at once."

"Very well." I breathed. I could now fill the void before me with answers. It was nearly overwhelming. I forced myself to toss out inquiries which didn't meet his limitation: all the 'what ifs' and questions of theory and my expansive curiosity for figuring out how things work. There would be time for those after this initial walk. I started narrowing until I found the

basics, then asked the cleanest academic question I could. "What is it made of?"

Before he responded, I got a look out of the corner of his eye I couldn't interpret. "Interesting question. I believe you understand the Pattern is not a friend, a pet, or a toy. However, it is also not a tool. There may be an argument that although it is none of those things, it is all of them and more. Do not concentrate on that theory, just be aware it exists. The Pattern is energy: that which propels the arrow and carries it. You will become the bow," he said.

It wasn't the answer I was expecting, which led me to new questions. "When you say it that way, it sounds as if we are the Pattern's tool." I knew he wouldn't like that. Bow implied tool, though, and I wanted to see how he might escape his own metaphor. "What is the process like that will enable me to be the bow? Let me try to clarify that one. I know I have to walk its design, just like wood must be cut for a bow, but how does it craft in me the ability to shoot the arrow?"

"We are no one's and no thing's tool, no matter how it sounds," he said. I tried not to smile, but I do love to goad him. "That is one of the lessons I had hoped to instill more strongly before you did this thing. It is important for many reasons. While on the Pattern it could be a minor distraction and sometimes minor distractions are too much."

He wasn't agitated, but firm. Next he tackled my question, not trying to escape his comparison, which impressed me. "To continue with the metaphor, though, you have already been hewn as bow and arrows. Now you seek to string that bow and notch an arrow. The walk shall help focus your potential. In the past, some small evidence has proven the walk is not necessary to access this potential; yet without the additional focus, the outcomes were marginal at best."

My eyebrows shot up. I had not known that. Perhaps Joss accessed unfocused potential. What would the limits of the talent be? How much could Joss learn without walking it? She and Andrew both seemed loath to set foot on the thing. If I could convince Joss to cautiously experiment, perhaps I'd find answers. Andrew might be more cooperative, and a safer choice.

"You mentioned its design," Father went on. "Not stopping is one

concern; related is following the correct path. The Pattern has several paths. Only one leads to the center. Make a wrong turn and you have to stop, or step off the path. Backing up is not possible. To step off the Pattern once started, or onto the Pattern at the wrong place, results in annihilation as if you were not of the blood. Studying that correct path will be your primary concern once we get to the chamber."

That brought on nerves. I'd thought it would be a matter of memorizing the maze's path, then going, but his tone left me wondering. "When you say distractions... What I mean to say is I've never had any problem focusing my attention on anything. Why would this be different?"

"Because there is nothing else even remotely like walking the Pattern. During your time in Shadow Reule, you experienced many aspects of that place: locations, beings, events, and so on. Yet there were still aspects you did not and could not experience. In fact, in that one Shadow, there were aspects you could never imagine. Even studying it for centuries from within and without, there would still be aspects you could not know about. Such is the nature of all Shadows and your mind's ability to cope with information.

"The Pattern will reveal all you may and may not know. For every aspect of every place... ever. This will be overwhelming and distracting beyond anyone's ability to describe it. So much so, that even a slight mental curiosity along the wrong stream of thought could inadvertently redirect the main course. Much as a car traveling at 320 kilometers per hour requires a firm grip on the steering wheel to keep it from crashing, yet the slightest twitch may also send it out of control. Unfortunately even these metaphors only imply a small part of the mental, physical, and emotional gauntlet that is the Pattern."

"Oh," I said, slowing down my pace slightly. Why would anyone drive 320 km/h? He'd probably done it, too. "Do you have any advice on how I should ignore it if the Pattern reveals something to me I did not know? I can see that might be very distracting." He seemed to sigh quietly. It was a very put upon kind of sigh, and the first sign he'd given that he found me trying this morn.

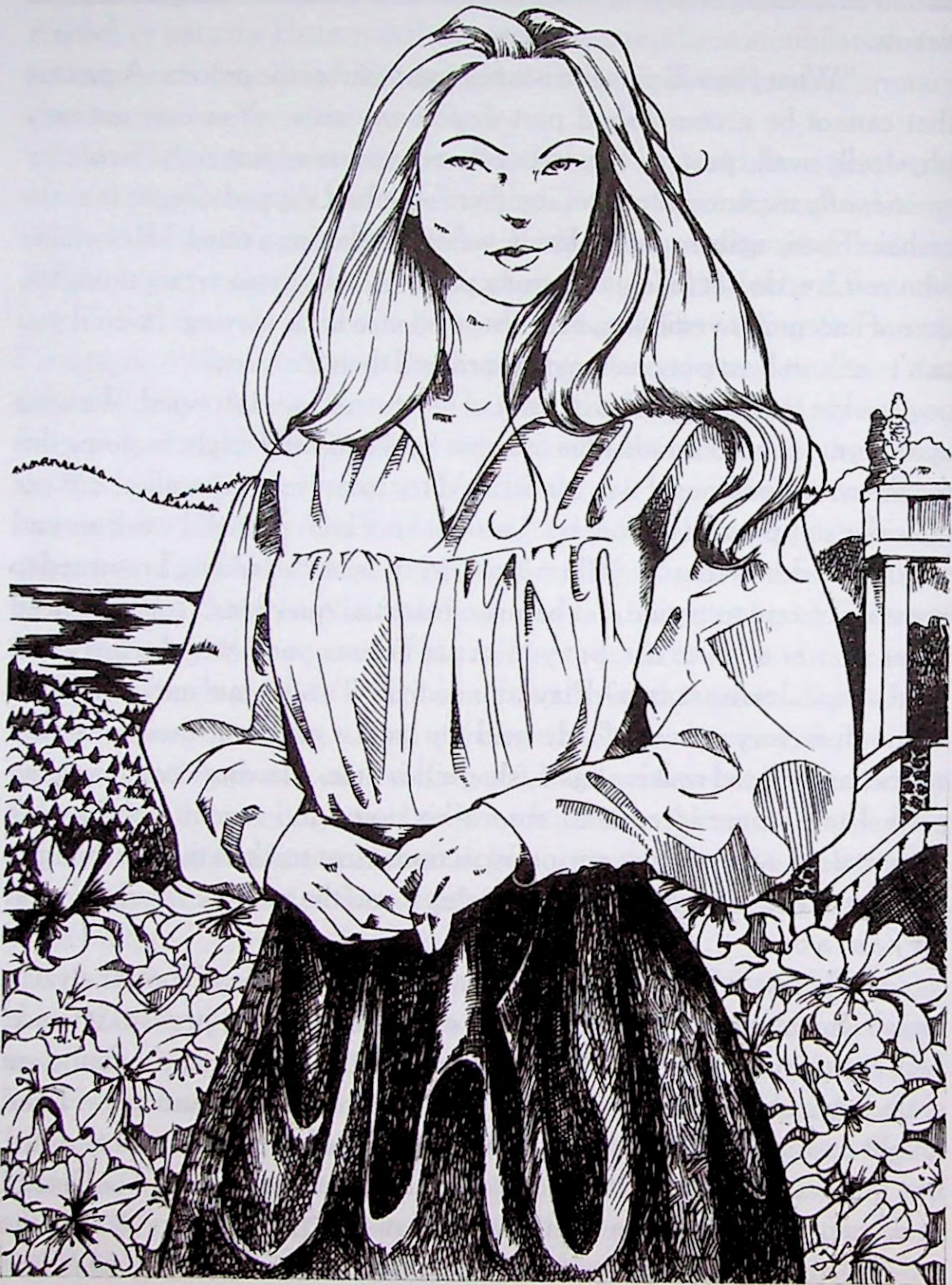
"That is the purpose for this conversation. For instance, there is no 'if.' **When** the Pattern reveals **all** that you do not know, you must not even consider ignoring any of it. That will only cause you to get caught up in an

internal struggle that has nothing to do with the task you will be trying to complete. Focusing any of your will, or thought, on ignoring something is as bad as focusing on trying to see more of something. Do not get caught in details.

“What you will perceive is a necessary part of the process. A process that cannot be accomplished part-way in any sense. You may not only physically walk part of the Pattern and you may not only *mentally/emotionally* experience part of it either.” He had slipped deeper into the archaic Thari, again sounding like he was remembering a ritual. “Remember who you are, do not follow the wrong path, do not pursue errant thoughts, do not succumb to emotion, and above all else keep moving. Even if you can’t walk, at least put one foot forward and then the next.”

He took a large step in front of me, turned, and stopped. We were eye to eye. I tried to smother the fear that he’d realized I might be doing this for the wrong reasons. I was afraid he’d try to prevent my walk. I did not consider stopping an option, but I also did not know how I’d work around him if he’d decided to try. When I saw that was not his intent, I returned to my state of rapt attention. “There are essential questions. You may need never answer them to me, but you **must** answer yourself: who are **you**? And who is **Jennastasia**? Play your own devil’s advocate until both sides have satisfactory answers.” He held my gaze a moment, then broke eye contact and started walking again, slower this time, allowing a contemplative pace. I took some seconds to absorb his point and regain mobility. He stayed silent, allowing me my introspection. I lost track of time in thought, enjoying the repetitive rhythm of our steps, and the motion. It helped clear my head a bit.

Who was I? I’d always thought it frivolous to spend time analyzing myself. Such examination rarely led to clear insight. Well, perhaps it would best to review. I was young and knew it. Still, for my age I found an abundance of common sense I often ignored to enjoy life and grow. I had fought hard to ensure my inner beauty was more bountiful than my outer. But that was more of what I had done, rather than who I was. I believed I could handle killing for the right reasons, but if my poppies don’t take to the soil in Arden I would be devastated. I was an emotional creature, no matter how I acted. In choosing between sight and insight, intuition won. I was



pretty deep. Upheavals at the bottom weren't always reflected on the surface. My capacity for love and hate were equal. Those were both dangerously strong. I savored dancing, getting dirt all over my hands, and singing (while alone.) A work in process, definitely. My family was important to me. I wanted mother happy and father proud and Auric to enjoy father through me, without jealousy. I wanted to be happy, proud of myself. I wanted the freedom to express myself to those I loved.

And who was Jennastasia? An easier question to answer. Jennastasia was the public face. The mask, I guessed Prince Bleys would say, the invention of myself for the world to see. Jennastasia was a Princess, and may fate help her, in some places she was a Goddess. And that was what she would stay. She would not fumble over oaths that needed giving, and she would accord them the proper respect. She would hide her temper, and nervousness, and annoyance. She would smile right through the worst experiences, saving her disdainful looks for those who deserved them. She would do right by the people looking up to her, whatever that cost her personal life, because that was part of being born with the privileges of royalty. She would very often bite her lip, damp down her sarcasm and even her laughter. Jennastasia was the piece of me who would never allow the rest of me to forget my duties, every last little part of them. Jennastasia was also the part of me that believed the Pattern was mine; that I owned it and I would walk it, as was my right. There would be no backing down or mistakes. Jennastasia now understood what father meant when he said, "We are the royalty. We just know what to do." A bit of a snob, elitist and believing that everyone did belong in their own place, while the deeper part of me wondered how that could be right. Jennastasia understood fairness had no place in her life, or anyone else's either. But she was just a part of the bigger Me. It was Jennastasia, who could go right to left and grasp reality, necessity, and then shove the last piece of the puzzle in.

"If I am understanding this correctly, I should let it all flow around me, or perhaps I should say through me, while above all else I strive toward the one goal of moving toward the center. Is this correct?" I asked Father.

"Yes," he confirmed, with a hint of relief. Was he so worried? "It is no more complex than that. However, it is a bit more refined. Now we need to do what we can to impart some of the finer points. Is there an area you

would like to start with?"

"It's so physically difficult I may find myself unable to walk?" I thought if anything would pose a problem, it would be that.

"It will wear you out... swiftly and on all levels. You will always be able to walk, but you will also want to rest. This is not the Pattern's doing. The Pattern is only functioning as it is meant to. The weariness is your own *mind/body/spirit* trying to compensate in the natural way. You must hold sway over personal nature, while completing your part in the function.

"Additionally, there will be the sparks. You will feel them, but they will not hurt unless you allow it. Which is one of the reasons you must be comfortable with the answers to who you are. If you are not satisfied with yourself, in all ways, any subconscious dissatisfactions may manifest in more physical ways," he informed me.

How anyone my age could be completely satisfied with herself I did not know. There were many things I could do better. There were many other things I'd like to do better but was unsure I could. I often found myself caught in the middle of a situation, pushing one way, while at the same time trying to force things to work in the other direction. Especially lately. At the same time, I'd been pleased with my progress. When I'd chosen to apply myself to a goal I'd never had significant trouble attaining it. I'd been able to handle my mistakes. I'd learned to avoid repeating them, most of the time.

All in all, I was happy with myself. There was nothing I'd been dissatisfied about which was unresolved, except the helplessness I felt due to the current situation. Still, that wasn't my fault, and I would resolve it. This ritual may only be the beginning. Afterward I would have to rest and ward off inquiries until I could get myself to a place where I could speak freely. I must break these bindings. Father had not hesitated in his delivery, so I forced my attention to stay with him.

"The sparks will also impair your actual vision after a short period. This is why you will take as much time as you need to memorize the path once there; though technically you should not need to. As the Pattern is part of me, so is it already part of you. You are already familiar with its shape on some level. This will make committing the path to your conscious mind easier. You will not need to pressure yourself to hold the path in mind. To do so would cause distraction, or lost attention. Do not get over-

confident though. To rely on your subconscious would be to stray down any number of wrong streams of thought," he finished.

"I've never been spiritually weary before," I said, returning to an early theme in his latest discourse. I was distressed over handling something I'd not experienced. Other concerns were restless to escape. "I've heard some conflicting stories about how it functions once the center is achieved. Dworkin had said to me that I should have my questions ready when I walk it. Now, given I don't trust him, I'm tempted to throw that aside, yet at the same time, I'm wondering if it might be an end function. From what you've said holding questions in my mind while walking it would be dangerous, if not impossible. What should I do when I do get to the center?"

"Dworkin is trustworthy, which tends to offer support to the argument against his being a family member. My father said on occasion that Dworkin either could not, or would not, knowingly participate in deception. On the other hand, just because he is honest does not mean he is necessarily talking about what the listener thinks he's talking about. No one seems sure if he is senile, crazy, pure genius, or some combination. He was not always so suspect, but age, time, and experiments I would dare not fathom have left their marks," he mused. "No matter what... if he says something in regards to the Pattern, no matter how cryptic, you may rely on it. He conceived and inscribed It. Whether entirely on his own is not clear, but he was there and integral." He paused to think again. "I believe 'have your questions ready when you walk it' is fairly straight forward. You are mostly correct about the end functionality, but his point seems to be to not wait until then to prepare. So while you study the Pattern and answer 'who-are-you,' you will also need to formulate your questions. Have them in mind just before walking the Pattern, but don't focus on them while walking it. You should be able to bring them readily to the fore when appropriate. It is an interesting manipulation of nuance, especially if accuracy is what I suspect. I wonder how many times..." he began, but trailed off abruptly, like he'd forgotten I was there. That caused me to speculate, but he went on with his lecture, and I did not want to miss anything.

"Lest I forget, you mentioned two other points. According to your mother, you have had ample practice at being spiritually weary. At least as much practice as any of the other disciplines that will come to bear. You

have had deep friendships and had to cope with their loss in a variety of ways. You have formed wants and striven to achieve them, sometimes failing to get exactly what you set out for and having to deal with that. These are mechanisms you excel in. Just don't let your reason trip your convictions up. Nor your body dissuade your mind, or heart. And so forth."

I did not tell him how long it had been since those days. It bothered me little to leave Derrick, the relationship having been over anyway. I chose not to make close friends at the last stop on the long tour of hideouts. I had weighed the costs, and decided it would be less painful to live without friends, than to make any I'd have to lie to and later leave. Besides, I had never had the chance to let those partings drag me down. Mother never left room in my life for pouting.

"I think my conception of spiritually weary differs from yours. I would take it to mean tired, worn down and ready to give up. I've never been ready to give up. That was all I meant," I told him.

"My point still supports the synonym. As will your experience. Which touches on the aligning of your thoughts to this task. Synonyms are synonyms for a reason. We can discuss that further shortly.

"The other thing was what you should do once in the center. Again, what you will do and be able to do afterwards is not something to spend a lot of thought on. Most of it will become clear by that point without any prior knowledge. I will say that once you have stepped past the third veil, you will be able to go anywhere. At that point you and the Pattern will be so closely aligned, merely willing action will make it so. That aspect of It will be the easiest It ever is. A payoff for having just experienced the hardest It ever is. After that you will need to employ more personalized skills. Skills Benedict, Auric, I, and I'm sure many others have offered to impart.

"Briefly on that subject: No one tutor is best and no matter how many there are, you will always develop your own nuances. After you walk, I still hold that Benedict and I are your best options as primary instructors. Even if you were to disagree with that, I strongly advise you stay within Amber when leaving the center. I also suggest not returning to Its perimeter. The walk back up these stairs is no less tedious."

I laughed. "Indeed! Really, I have no plans of walking back up when I can avoid it. Nor do I plan on trying to go into shadow without a

guide. It would be inadvisable at the best of times, but especially foolish after what Armond told me. I would prefer to learn from you and Benedict first, and then perhaps compare how Auric does things. Right now I'm not looking further out than that."

"What has Armond told you?" he asked curiously, his tone carrying a healthy dose of disbelief that anything Armond said could matter.

"He's faced a few assassination attempts in shadow recently. And his manor in the City was broken into, resulting in the injury of one of his servants. He says he went to hunt the fellow down and found an army. He then returned to get Ian, but they ran into 'Shadowtraps' and had to come back. He thinks there is a possibility this 'person' is from Chaos. That's the bone of it," I told him.

"Hmph. Armond *was/is* sloppy. His woes bear no relation to the mischief you may stumble into. To help you avoid such *errs* and better equip you to deal with them once they have happened, let us return to your preparation...

"Semantics are only a matter of opinion in terms of language, and language is only a tool for the mind. Growing up, one becomes accustomed to the conventions of language to the extent that one forgets that the mind orders the language, not the other way round. Choosing words often becomes more a matter of how a message sounds, rather than how it conveys the primary meaning. More aesthetic synonyms are often substituted to accomplish such tasks."

"Synonyms are different facets of a single gem. They contain the same essential substance, but observation from alternate angles may refocus the viewer's attention. The viewer is the speaker as well as the listener. Do not allow a natural penchant for language to distract you with a shinier angle of intent. Make sure what you are thinking is what you mean, not just how you would say it. The Pattern allows for little misrepresentation of intent." His tone had become that of teacher. He hadn't used that tone for years, and I found I had missed it.

"Very well," I said. There was a lull before he continued.

"As I suspect you have now come to understand, the journey to the center of the Pattern is mainly a non-physical one. This is not to suggest the physical aspects aren't quite trying. The need to memorize the correct path

for example, is largely due to the sparks." He paused, and I nodded in acknowledgement. "Am I to take it from your silence that you are aware of the sparks? Or do you just need some time to think right now?" He wasn't being pushy, but sincere. Joy bubbled up in me. I'd been examining my layers throughout his dialog, and his points were redirecting my thinking into deeper levels. Down beneath whatever pains and trials I'd had, was this gentle pool of happiness. It was filled with little gifts he and mother had given me. I did not rebel, like I'd watched so many of my schoolmates do, as Joss did. What would I rebel against? His firmness was right. How did one learn to achieve if one was not pressured to strive? So many things mother told me, easily dismissed at the time, made sense now. Her laughter belonged to me. His too, even though usually my backward questions caused it.

"I understand. Please, keep talking. It helps," I told him. He nodded. As much as Auric resented the way Father formed expectations, I counted on them. Had Auric stepped back a few times, he might have been able to really enjoy the moments like these, where Father set aside the pressure to allow room for exploration. But I didn't have the right to judge Auric. I did not know what it was to be Prince Julian's son, to lose a mother as a toddler. I only knew what it was to be his daughter. That he had different expectations of my skills due to my gender.

"I shall expand on the sparks then. Some attention to them may help to keep you aware of your physical situation. This again falls into the broad category of 'relax and pay attention to everything, but do not lose sight of your goal.'" He contemplated a moment before beginning again.

"It occurs to me that you have been awake and active for some time now. It is important that you not undertake this effort when fatigued, or intoxicated." He seemed to be going over a mental checklist. "Although you feel there is a pressing need to do this now, you should not allow emotion, or desire, to cause this Pattern walk."

I held in a sigh. I did not see how I could not do it. I did not feel all that tired. I thought I could easily do another eight hours the hard way, and if I were to lounge around I could probably stay awake another two sunsets.

"The closer you are to true objectivity before starting, the better. Confidence and acceptance are aides on the walk."

“The sense of resistance will grow steadily with the sparks, except for three points, known as the veils. I will show you where they occur on the path, when we are there. Again, do not bother with anticipating them. I mention them so you are not surprised, or disheartened, when it happens. The veils mark intense focal points. The resistance will increase rapidly, and seem to become overwhelming. Each veil is more trying than the last. Once through the first two, the intensity slacks off slightly. These are crucial moments to keep moving, as they are when you will most want to rest.

“Before you start, understand why you are doing this. Consider the long-term effects, and not just your immediate goals, no matter how important. This act will change you forever. It is your right to experience, but it should not be done simply as a vehicle to reach some nearby point.”

I stayed quiet, knowing he realized I'd determined to step foot on it today. Yet, he still wanted me to look at the broader picture. Which I did. I found the broader picture much more comforting than the short term one. I would come to understand why mother often inserted lessons into my life by force. If she was as amazing as I thought she was, I might even be able to withstand the responsibilities inherent in 'godlike' power. I would be able to mold reality. I could say that now, and have seen it done. Yet, I still had no conception of what it meant to my life. I didn't even think I was saying it right. I'd be able to mold 'shadow,' using the Pattern. If Amber was reality it was therefore immutable. That's what everyone had inferred. If the kingdom was indeed the base of reality I could see why everyone fought so hard for it.

“Once completed, will yourself to a familiar place, such as your room. It will be similar to using a Trump. See the place in your mind and put yourself there.”

He ceased speaking to contemplate. “The Pattern is many things at once. Some *have/do* claim It is all things. This includes your self. While the essence that is the Pattern may be in everything, we contain a special connection with It. It is part of us, possibly before there is even an 'us.' Walking Its path will awaken that link, forge it, and imprint you all at once. The Pattern will in one sense re-assemble you to contain It. From another perspective you will be inscribing an image of yourself onto It. This may seem like an exchange of energies. It is more akin to two sculptors, made of

clay, molding each other.

"I regret this metaphor, as it suggests the Pattern has a sentience, as some of our kin have theorized that It does. However, even they concede that if It does have a sentience, consciousness, or will, it is far removed from our own. So much so that It effectively has none." At that he fell silent, and seemed to be caught up in his own thoughts, as I was in mine.

At the foot of the stairs were a table and a single chair. Two guards were posted there. They snapped to attention when Father appeared. He put them at ease. "For what cause the double shift?"

As he exited the stairway, a scream or howl echoed from a side tunnel. Both guards blanched slightly with recognition, while I jumped, surprised out of my meditation. The taller one answered. "That m'lord. Prince Andrew has us tracking it as best we can. It seems able to pass through the living stone; so swiftly that some reports almost put it in two places at once."

"Or..." Father prompted.

"Or there is more than one," the other guard conceded. "From Prince Andrew's orders we have reason to hope there is only the one. Though I suspect 'hope' is not the right word."

I shuddered. I'd first heard the scream sound earlier, as I sought the Pattern room, and I'd meant to tell Father about it. Unfortunately I'd gotten distracted dealing with Joss and Caine. At least the situation was being investigated.

The echo of marching feet came toward us as two more guards rounded the corridor. Their lantern was nearly out of fuel. They saluted Father as well. "Marcly and Coan reporting for shift change," Marcly informed the other two.

"We shan't keep you." Father said. The taller of the first two picked up a fresh lantern and they trotted off into the tunnels. "Know you the direct route to the Pattern?" he asked the relief.

"Yes, sir," Marcly answered.

"Is the way clear? Has that area been covered?"

Marcly looked over reports on the table. Were they maps? I'd have someone's skin if I found out that guard had a map the first time I was down

and denied me the information. "No activity has been reported in, or near that area, sir. All activity to date has been in the catacombs, the sealed dungeons, and the more northern caverns."

"Thank you, Corporal. Make note we are headed that way," Father told him. The guard saluted again, in recognition of the command, and I smiled encouragement at them. Once we were out of earshot, I said to father, rather sarcastically, "Well, no one can say it hasn't been exciting so far."

"We shall see..." he muttered. He'd returned to his normal tone, less the educator and more the father I barely knew.

"How old were you when you walked it?" I asked.

He hesitated before responding. "I do not recall the exact age. I had experienced roughly 65 to 70 personal years before Oberon allowed me to assay the Pattern the first time. Some of my time was spent training in Shadow and I do not recall all the temporal differences. On the other hand I was born in the 332nd Year of Established Sovereignty and my walk was documented in the 390th year. Thus as far as Amber records are concerned I was 58."

"But you don't think age has anything to do with it, do you?" I wanted to confirm his philosophy on the subject. He pursed his lips and spent a few more minutes in thought before answering.

"Others have successfully walked when around your age. Armond, as a positive example, could not have been more than 5 years older... I believe that a proper mental and emotional disposition compensates for minimal personal experiences. The concept of 'maturity' does not really seem apropos. Armond is more mature, having walked young, than is his mother, who waited until she was at least 85. On the other hand, I believe Brand was younger than you his first time. Possibly Fiona as well. Brand was likely mad long before he took the Pattern, supporting my 'proper disposition' statement. Fiona may just be less flamboyant than her brother..." he trailed off. Funny how he wasn't claiming Brand as his brother, putting that whole burden on Aunt Fiona. Not that I blamed him.

I returned to thinking. I had to get back into the correct mindset. We walked about eight minutes in silence, and I managed to focus myself again. When we reached the door I found myself amused. The walk was much

shorter when the way was known! I felt relieved he'd forced me upstairs after my foolish attempt to find it on my own, despite the embarrassment with the guards

We finally came to the door. It was a very tall and thick affair, made of wood. It seemed to be greenheart, a tree I had noted in Arden, known for its durability and longevity. I put in the key and turned, no easy task, but it worked. I then tried to pull open the door. I couldn't do it. I gave it my all and it didn't budge.

Father stepped next to me. "Perhaps you will allow me?" he offered. I hid my embarrassment by saying, "That would be wonderful." He placed his feet and braced himself, and pulled it right open.

"Thank you," I said.

He stared at a carving on the inside of the door. It looked like Lord Ian, and about it was scratched "ha ha ha" and "he he he." It gave me the creeps. The room felt right, but the carving felt wrong. It did not belong in this place, where our family must grow or die, succeed or suffer the ultimate failure. The Pattern was a power beyond my understanding, and it might always be. Therefore, like the gods, a thing to be revered. This vandalism of the door was blasphemous sacrilege. I wanted the perversion rectified, but at the time there was nothing to be done.

I looked at the key and sighed. I was still annoyed that Ian had distrusted me so much that he'd insisted I swear its return. Still, I had taken an oath. I got out his trump. "Excuse me a moment, Father."

"Most certainly."

"I must fulfill my oath now," I drawled. He nodded and folded his arms over his chest. I focused, and there was Ian, running. He wore gleaming armor over a leather jerkin that had seen better days. His green eyes were even brighter in his dim surroundings. The armor was rococo, enlivened with heavy relief work. It was too fancy to suit him. The helm was more his style, basic and functional. Arm and leg greaves matched the breastplate. He reminded me of 'The Last Knight,' an oil I'd viewed at the Capital Gallery in Urlon.

I'd been told Ian was Gerard's son, but no one mentioned he held the key to the Pattern room. I'd found that out the hard way after my first errant escapade to find the Pattern, upon arrival at the door. There posted

was a plaque, which read "See Ian for the key." Ian was Captain of the Guard, perhaps a bit anal in his sense of duty, and therefore he was paranoid when confronted with the unknown. Myself, for example. I did not really know him though, so he was hard to judge. He was running through caves, I realized, and it jolted me out of my inspection. I held the key out. "What are you doing?"

"Running," he said, and took the key. Was he chasing whatever was prowling the dungeons? Was he being chased? I decided it'd be best not to impede him.

"Okay. Thank you," I added, trying to be friendly. There were many different ways to react in these situations. Ian obviously reacted with terseness. I really shouldn't hold it against him until he did it under more normal circumstances. I ran my hand over the card.

I put it away, and with it all those outside thoughts. I was in the room! I turned, letting myself focus for the first time on the beautiful maze filling the cavern. It was about 90 meters by 140 meters, and it spread over most of the chamber, leaving just enough room for one person to walk about its circumference, with a bit more room by the door. Its light showed me the cavern walls, but failed to illuminate the ceiling.

The glow was the eerie blue of nightflowers under a new moon. I could see the center, which looked small from the door. I could see the lines, anti-lines and many curvings and endings.

"Now I will describe the path," Father began. Again, I felt so relieved he was there.

I felt prepared to do this. All I had to do now was memorize it, meditate on it, and go. I nodded, and he began slowly walking the perimeter. I followed. A bit less than halfway around he pointed to the far side. "That is the beginning. You walk..." he described as we proceeded back and forth, parallel the path. I gave him my full attention, making sure I had it memorized as he spoke. The veils... the first was very close to the edge, the other two further inside. He gave me step counts, which helped with memorization but wouldn't be useful once I commenced. He explained where the sparks should reach at which point, while still pointing out I should not be concerned with them. Sharp turns led into the third veil, but it was the shortest of the three.

"Once you finally get through the third veil you will be at the center. If you feel you must collapse, control it enough that you stay within the center," he said. I breathed acknowledgment. I did not like the idea of ending it in collapse, though I would crawl to the center if I had to. From where we stood the center only looked big enough to stand in. Father saw my measurement and added, "The center is large enough for you to go down on your knees, but if you fall too far forward you will go off. It's possible you don't have to worry about this at all at your current height."

"Okay." I said again.

I noticed movement in my periphery, and turned to find Andrew and Ian by the door. They talked intently. I stared at them. Had they found the source of the screams? Did they need father? Had 'it' killed someone? "Jenna," Father called firmly. I swung my head back around to look up at him. "Concentrate on the Pattern. Make sure you're comfortable with the path."

"Right," I muttered. Right. Nothing else mattered.

"Make sure you're as comfortable with the feel as you can get from the outside. Walk around it more, if need be. Stand wherever is best for you," he advised.

"What will happen if I put my hand out, right over the top of the first part here?"

Well, as long as you don't actually touch it you can hold it above it." His eyebrows drew together.

"Does it do anything?"

"It's doing everything that it does," he explained. I laughed.

"Okay." I knelt to get closer. Father encouraged my experiment by leaving me alone. He stepped to the men, while I slowly held my hand over it. I wanted to see it spark, or arc, or give any sort of connection toward my hand. Father claimed it was energy. I'd learned bodies generate and expel energy in different forms. Yet it didn't do anything neat. I felt the glow, but only faintly. I closed as much as possible without touching it, but the sensation remained unchanged.

Interesting. How did it recognize who is 'of the blood' and who isn't? I had a million questions, some of which father might not answer. I

still considered asking when Joss's yells echoed into the hall.

"Jenna, don't! Jenna, stop! Don't!" she was screaming. I clenched my hand into a fist and growled, "Oh, gods." She continued ranting. Her footfalls were catching up with her voice, and I knew she was running.

"Andrew, catch her, please," I directed past Father and Ian, to my cousin at the door. I pulled back from the Pattern but continued to kneel.

"What?" he asked, glancing away from the outer corridor at me. He must not have heard me over her screams.

"Catch her," I said loudly.

"She's coming this way," he said, pointing out the obvious. He must not have worried that in her rush she could easily step onto the Pattern at the wrong side, thus annihilating herself. He also perhaps did not care that if she got as far as Lord Ian or my father they might not gently calm her.

"I know, catch her." I yelled with as much dignity as I could muster. She continued her screaming mantra.

"What do you want me to do? Stop her?" he asked. I looked at him. I'd just told him three times. "Yes or no?"

"Stop her at the door," I explained. He turned and pulled shut the door, while I said, "Don't shut...the door." The Pattern brightened as soon as the door closed. Gods, but it was amazing. It was at least four times brighter. The walls became defined. It wasn't bright enough to light the far reaches above, but stalactites were revealed. I turned back to the Pattern.

"What's going on?" Andrew asked. "I'm confused." I looked at him pointedly.

"Can you calm her down and tell her everything will be okay?" I pleaded.

"I suppose so."

"That would be very wonderful, because she will get hysterical very quickly," I added.

"Why is she getting hysterical?" he wondered.

"I'm not really sure," I told him, though I'd guessed. He got out his trump deck. "But obviously..." I motioned toward the very thick door, from which soft noises that could only be Joss's pounding came. I then leaned back over the Pattern and put the matter from my mind. "This is much better," I whispered. I put my hand out again, and felt coolness from

the Pattern. It wasn't unpleasant. I looked to father. The pounding had stopped. "Has anyone ever done this barefoot?" I asked.

"Llewella did in Rebma," Ian answered.

"As far as I know, no one has ever walked this Pattern barefoot. I believe Ian is correct that Llewella did walk Rebma's barefoot. I do not believe that Martin walked barefoot. Of course, it would have been in Rebma, so it is a possibility," Father added.

"Do you think it would do anything...weird?" I queried, lacking a better word.

"It is not a factor," Father informed me.

"Well, then. I don't like these shoes," I muttered. Earlier they'd been a fine choice, but now... they were so new. Also, I wanted connection to earth. Even if Father hadn't mentioned the ritual of the walk, I learned it in every motion I went through in preparation. The walk had three veils, as much of the literature I'd read throughout our varying worlds had three tasks, or aspects. I wondered if they'd be indicative of past, present and future; or fears, hopes and reality; or spirit, psyche and body; or none; or all.

I took off my shoes.

"She's not taking it. She's right there!" Andrew said in frustration. He concentrated on Joss's trump again, but stepped right back against the door with a look of pain. "You contact her if you want her," he said, and put his card away. I shook my head. As bad as I felt for Joss, she'd have to be hysterical on her own in the dark hallway. I felt Andrew, Ian, and Father watch me as I returned to meditation. I sat back and closed my eyes. Distractions fell away as I focused on the path.

Then I worked out my questions. As I thought, I moved away from the men. The pounding resumed. Father saw me moving toward the entrance point and intercepted me before I'd gotten very far. I was about to tell him I wasn't starting yet, but he spoke first. "I suggest that you do not walk it with the door closed." I found this advice disappointing.

"Why? Is it going to be harder?"

"No one knew until a few days ago that it grew brighter when the door was closed and therefore no one can know what the effects will be," he explained. I sighed. In all honesty, I wanted to walk it in this brighter, more

'alive' state. It tempted me, but he had a point and I couldn't justify risking life on whim.

"All right. Can you work on getting the door open?" I was nearly prepared, and didn't want to delay longer.

"Your cousins are in the process of doing that."

"Very well. Then I'll wait."

Joss gave up pounding, at least for the moment. Ian and Andrew were competing in a game I had not seen since I was very young – paper, dagger, rock. I grinned. Ian drew his sword. Father, whose long legs never fail to give more haste than expected, leaned over and slipped something under the door. Andrew and Ian moved toward the path's onset, so I moved back to my shoes. Ian stopped before making it, appearing to be in trump contact with someone. He talked at any rate, but I couldn't hear him, and my angle was such that I could not tell if he held a trump or not. Then he turned to me.

"Lady Jenna," he called, then hushed whomever he talked with and continued. "Joss wishes to speak with you before you walk the Pattern."

I sighed. Again, how obvious, as if I did not know this.

Father stalked toward him. "Ian, give her the key," he ordered. I nodded. Now there was a sane plan.

"That's fine, give her the key." I conjoined.

Father kept moving, adding, "Or go out and open the door for her."

"Make her swear on it," I encouraged Ian, unable to hide my bitterness. "You know, threaten to blood curse her. That'll work too." I got a bit loud at the last, and forced myself to calm. Father continued toward him, and Ian said something to the person in the contact, who I think was indeed Joss. He held out his empty hand, continued his conversation, and then looked at me again. He looked refocused in such a way I thought him to be out of the contact. He still had the key, and she had not entered.

"Lady Jenna, Joss wishes to speak with you before you walk the Pattern," he repeated.

"Thank you," I told him grudgingly. I got out my trump deck. It had become obvious there would be no peace until I had taken care of Joss myself, persuaded Ian to give up the key, gone back out and opened the door, and screamed my head off until everyone left. This, as it was, had

become my plan. I got out her trump, and was about to focus, when I heard the deadly hiss of Father drawing his sword. My head snapped up. He'd reached Ian. Father said something quietly, and Ian asked why. Father's sword moved. Ian stuck the point of his to the stone, refusing to fight. I froze. To say I was shocked would be an understatement. I thought Ian was about to die.

I couldn't breathe, nor hear much but my heart racing. Father looked like he was to take off Ian's head, but at the decisive moment he turned his blade flat. It slapped Ian in the side of the helm, pinning his head to the wall. I could barely make out Father's clipped, mean, "Because I told you to." I unfroze and breathed. I thought the situation ridiculous, and I was more than fed up with father's over-reactions.

I yelled, "Father, that's a little distracting." I was, as I apparently will always be when he gets like this, ignored. Ian stepped back toward the beginning of the Pattern, and thus toward Andrew. He knew this and ordered Andrew to move. Father grabbed for Ian. Andrew quickly glanced at the trail forward, at Ian and father, and at the Pattern. Then he took one step over to the incision point and stepped on.

I gasped, "Gods!" Andrew told me recently that he did not want to walk it. I doubted he'd prepared at all for it. "Father..." I said softly, willing him to notice Andrew. I took my eyes from Andrew to see Ian backing up adroitly, Father at almost a full run. Ian leapt back. My hand itched to slap Father. That was a new feeling. I yelled for him, again, but he remained engaged. Ian leapt again, then stood firm, very close to the Pattern's entrance. Father grabbed him and yanked the key off by breaking the chain that kept it on Ian's neck. My frustration bubbled over.

"That is not what I meant!" I yelled. As annoying, frustrating and frightening as I found this behavior, what I most wanted was to distance myself from these rampages. If he insisted on acting on my behalf, I wanted it known I did not find it acceptable, nor would I condone it. I remembered him always cold and distant when angry. Was this rage developed by the war, or had he kept it hidden when I was young? Was the frosty distance merely a kindness he afforded me? A way to avoid permanent damage to us? He effortlessly lifted Ian over his head. Somehow, in the midst of all

this, Ian had managed to sheath his sword. And all in all, considering his situation, he looked very calm. Remarkable.

Now, for a second I thought Ian might be tossed onto the Pattern. Of course, the whole point was to allow me to walk it, and it'd be impossible with remains of Ian in my way; thus I reasoned Father wouldn't do this. Nor was I wrong. Ian slammed onto the ground behind Father, just inches from the edge. Father turned and came toward me.

In his hand was the key, some cloth that had previously belonged to Ian, and the broken chain. I swallowed a wince and put on my most benign expression. I glanced back at Joss's card. I wanted nothing more than her to open it so I could go through and escape this madness. Joss's hysteria I could deal with. Father's is a bit too much for me. "Damn it Joss! It's me!" I yelled at the door. She continued to block the trump call. What did she think, that dead Eric was going to find some cards and call her? I heard Ian bellow, "No!" I looked up as he lunged at Father.

I did wince then, and hoped I wasn't to be pounded on the sidelines. I gave up trying to contact Joss, and looked back to Andrew. He was still moving. Father faced Ian, then glanced back, throwing me the key. "Jenna, get the door open," he insisted. I was lucky I caught the thing, for had I missed it would have landed on the Pattern.

I was having second thoughts about opening the door. First, it meant physically dealing with Joss. More importantly, it would do something to the Pattern, make it less bright, and Andrew was on it. I did not know what would happen if it dimmed with a person on it.

As I walked toward the door, Father turned and braced for Ian's tackle. They landed, Ian on top, and he grabbed Father by the hair, got him good. They began talking, and I sighed with relief. Death or dismemberment seemed unlikely while they spoke. I got to the door and opened my trump box.

"Do not give the key to Joss until Andrew is to the center of the Pattern," Father yelled from across the room, still under Ian.

I bit my lip to hold back a sarcastic commentary. He only had to be tackled and held down to arrive at the logical conclusion. I told him, "I wasn't going to, so okay," in my snotty little girl voice. Then I grinned. I would never sass him like that if he weren't pinned to the ground.

I flipped through my cards to get to the three Auric had given me of myself. I hadn't time to study his work. I hadn't asked him for anything specific in the trump. There I stood in Arden, with the Chateau's veranda steps and front terrace behind on my left. He'd drawn me self-possessed and graceful. It looked as if I was about to step out of the card on my own. The smile captured amusement and delight, the eyes, excitement.

I glanced up. Andrew still moved; Ian and father had removed themselves to squat against the wall and talked in low tones. I don't understand men. I pushed my miniportrait under the door and waited.

The men got up, and Father headed for me. I tried to decide how to approach this situation so I could reprimand him for being manic, while thanking him for his efforts. Little taps came through the door. I pounded back in answer. Then she trumped me. I opened right up, and gave her a taste of my frustration.

"Why are you freaking out?" I growled.

"I remembered..." she began, and hesitated.

"I remember lots of things... and what?" I persisted.

"Remember, he said walking the Pattern was a bad idea. I mean, he didn't say it in words..."

"No." I interrupted. "No." I calmed. Damn, all this because she'd finally decided it was time to analyze our conversation with Dworkin. I was angry with her. Andrew was on the Pattern, ill-prepared. Father and Ian had fought. My concentration was being interrupted, and time kept passing. "What he said, Joss, was, 'They've gotten to you, too.' Which might mean he doesn't want me to do it, but it doesn't mean it's a bad idea," I snapped.

"But he said the Pattern shouldn't have been remade like that," she insisted.

"It doesn't matter!" I told her, and she jumped with a cry as Auric took her shoulder softly. Once she saw him she relaxed, but she'd been terrified.

"Hello, Auric," I said. I glanced back at father, and groaned inwardly. It would take a miracle for this to work out well.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"I'm fine," I smiled reassuringly. He was unconvinced; his little worry crease didn't fade.

"Do you want to get out of there?" Joss tried.

"No," I said firmly, "Andrew is walking it." Joss swore.

Auric's forehead creased more. "Andrew is not ready," he said.

"He'd better be ready," I sighed. He was nearing the first veil.

"He's doing okay," I told them. Joss sighed in relief.

"Why don't we go in?" Auric said to Joss. "I can take us back up using trump."

"No, we're not opening the door right now," I told them.

"We'll not open the door. We'll come through you," Auric proposed.

"But then we'll still be locked in..."

"I can get us back upstairs," he promised. Not that getting upstairs would help me.

"Okay, well, hold on." I hesitated, because I was sure he and father would fight. "It's getting awfully crowded. Just hold on, um, there's a lot of..."

"Jenna, he might need help." Auric said firmly.

"You can help him walk the Pattern?"

"There are no guarantees, but if he needs help I would rather be there," he said, and meant it. I'd thought assistance impossible. I turned to Father.

"I'm going to bring people though, if that is all right," I told him.

"Yes, as long as the door remains closed," Father said. I held my hand out. Joss took a step back, but stayed in contact. Auric took a moment to convince her he possessed the skill to leave the locked room, and I pulled them through. I started on Joss, now that I could shake her.

"I'm going to walk it," I said as firmly as I could manage. "Quit trying to talk me out of it. Don't distract me. All right?"

"Sure," she said quietly.

"I'm positive." I continued. "Don't distract me."

"You will not walk it until the door is open," Father said firmly from beside me. I waved my hand at him, indicating I understood.

"Very well," he accepted, and greeted Auric.

"Do you understand?" I asked Joss.

"Are you sure?" she asked me.

"How many times need I say it, Joss, that I'm sure?" I demanded.

"Aren't you worried about what he said... I mean, the guy is crazy, I know... but I really think he might be right," she persisted. I took a deep breath and condescended to explain, again.

"He didn't say it was dangerous to walk it, Joss. He said, 'So they've gotten to you too.' That doesn't mean it is dangerous to walk. That might mean he doesn't want me to walk it. That doesn't mean it's dangerous to walk it. If Andrew can do it, I can do it."

"Yeah, okay."

"So let's wait and see," I added. My next words cost me emotionally, considering what they would mean, compounded by the fact that my every intention was to go ahead. "Maybe if Andrew doesn't make it, I will think maybe I should wait."

"That's fair," she said, seeming relieved. She missed the two 'maybes,' as intended.

Andrew stepped into the first veil. He moved very slowly. I worried.

Ian came to stand beside me. After a few minutes watching Andrew, he asked for the key. I gave it back to him. He probably sleeps with the damn thing on.

Andrew pushed, but about two-thirds of the way through the veil, he slowed so much I held my breath, thinking he'd falter. He sped up for a moment, and seemed to be moving along again. Auric and father had their heads together, looking at a trump, when Andrew stopped. I was shocked. He had just stopped dead.

"Go!" I screamed. "Walk!" barked Ian. Between us I could not hear Joss, though I watched her panic out of the corner of my eye, afraid she'd forget herself and go after him. "Keep moving!" I yelled. "Keep moving! Go!"

He didn't move. His face was colorless. I kept yelling, hoping he would hear. When finally he moved it looked painful. I glanced at Father, whose hand was on Auric's shoulder, apparently working with him on something. Was this the help Auric had talked about? I looked to Andrew, who walked again.

"What are you doing?" Ian bit at Auric.

"Helping him." Auric answered.

I'd been so focused on Andrew I hadn't noticed Ian's blade emerge.

He didn't do anything with it, but there it was. He didn't seem satisfied with Auric's answer, either.

"Nothing was done until he needed help. We are not interfering." Father told him. Ian was grinding his teeth. Father released Auric's shoulder and headed toward us. Auric looked up at that and said, "I'm not going to let one of my cousins die, Ian. I can help. You can't."

I noticed my hands were shaking, made them stop. I was far too close to being in Andrew's place. Father stepped to Ian's side and they commenced whispering. All I caught was, "He's not going to make it if..." from Father; then Ian, "Promise me you'll tell him." Then Father nodded, "If he survives." Ian stepped back and Father moved beside me.

Andrew was almost past the first veil, but he was slowing again. His motion could just barely be perceived. "Come on, Andrew," I whispered. Ian had knelt beside his sword, and used it to tell if Andrew's feet were still moving. Joss took up a quiet mantra of "Go, Andrew."

Then Andrew stopped again.

"Auric!" Ian bellowed. Well, he must have believed that Auric was helping, after that little talk with Father. The sparks, which father had said would only be knee to mid-thigh high at this point, were up to Andrew's waist. I did not know if that was an effect of his continued faltering, or perhaps the added power It did seem to have with the door closed. I determined to investigate that further, later.

Joss shifted nervously. "Move, Andrew. Move." And he did, very slowly, until he broke past the veil. His pace increased slightly. He glanced at us. Ian gave him a thumbs up while Joss and I whispered encouragement. I calmed myself down again; forced my shaking to stop, again. Andrew's eyes had looked very strained in that quick glance, but that was to be expected.

"Do you know what he knows now?" Ian asked Auric.

"I know nothing about what's in his mind," Auric claimed. He must have had a light touch.

"How do we help him?" Joss asked the room in general.

"Wish him well," Ian sighed.

"I'm going to bring him out if he stops again. I gave him a second chance," Auric announced.

"That's not yours to do. That is not yours to decide," Ian claimed.

I looked at him. Did he want Auric to stand there and watch Andrew die when he could help?

"No one told him," I said to Ian, meaning Andrew had no tutoring on how to walk it.

"I may not have the energy to give him, if he stops again," Auric said.

"If he stops again, I will try to help you." Ian offered.

"How do you do that?" Joss asked, but got no answer. Father looked preoccupied. Auric was distracted by what he was doing. Andrew lost speed again, then disappeared, as did Father.

I looked around in shock. Auric fell back into the wall. "Bleys pulled him off through Julian," he mumbled. Auric sat down and shook his head.

I pulled out Father's trump. In the corner of my eye Joss started doing something. I questioned her but she ignored me. I got Ian's attention though, for he directed, in his strong voice, "Lady Joss, please stop doing that." She stopped, but wanted to know why she should.

"I don't know, but right now adding a volatile to this equation could prove explosive," Ian explained, which was exactly what I had been thinking. I added, "Because, if you mess up this Pattern I'm going to be really pissed."

"I don't see how it'd mess up the Pattern. It's one hell of a power source," she admired.

I turned to her, the trump gripped tightly in my right hand. My left hand had the box in an equally annoyed grip. I was unable to hide my anger, or my sarcasm, despite knowing it would hurt her. She needed to realize the responsibility involved in the powers she was wielding. "Now look, Joss, did you think you could trump Eric?" I asked, and answered for her. "No. Don't do it."

"I'm sorry," she said. I felt bad, but someone had to teach her. Ian questioned what she'd been about, but she deflected him.

I concentrated on the trump. Father was blocking it. I pushed harder. He still was blocking.

Now, I'd come to learn there is some etiquette involved in trump calls. I can only try to justify my next action by saying that I was scared, and

very determined. I wanted to know what had just happened. Was Andrew alive, as Auric implied, or was my brother just keeping Joss and me calm? I'd waited so long for this day. I was prepared to walk it, ready, and annoyed that obstacles kept getting in the way.

I pushed on the card with all my might and yelled, "Open it!"

And it was open. Father looked shocked, and I actually felt his fear. "Stop it!" he snapped.

"Where are you?" I snapped back, and there the answer was, right out of his mind. He was in Bleys' manor. I pulled back and put my hand over my mouth. I hadn't meant to do that. I closed my eyes and muttered, "I've got to stop doing that. I've got to stop doing that. Benedict told me not to concentrate that hard."

I opened my eyes to see Father offer his hand. "Come to me," he said. I shook my head.

"No, I want to walk it," I pleaded. He kept his hand out. "You already did this once to me today," I complained. He reached out and yanked me to him.

In the hallway of Bleys' Manor, Father immediately moved me to the door and outside. I was relieved to be out of Bleys' home. The last thing I needed was his playing the gracious host again. We headed through city streets, back to the castle. It was early morning. There were lots of people were doing business.

"What the hell was that?" I demanded rather rudely.

"What the hell was what?"

"Andrew disappearing. You disappearing."

"Andrew was faltering. I told you the dangers of it. Considering the fact that he was faltering on something apparently more powerful than anybody has yet been aware of, we saved him," he explained. Those last three words held much; he was surprised, and while not awed, he was definitely proud of what they'd done.

"How? With trump?"

"Trump was involved," he offered. I wasn't in the mood to play his digging game, so I redirected.

"Did you know you could do this?" I asked. I wasn't upset that he

might have held that knowledge back from me. I could see why he'd not want me thinking about a back door out. But still. He'd made it sound as if stopping meant death, no questions asked. No way out.

"Not until Auric was kind enough to show me," he answered. So, indeed, perhaps Father could find Auric useful after all.

"Okay," I smiled. "So we're going back now."

"Yes, we can go back now, but I don't want you walking it..."

"...with the door closed," I finished with him. "Yes, I know. I wasn't going to," I told him for the third time.

"I appreciate you telling me that, and I am not suggesting that you are lying to me, but the reason I brought you to me was for my own safety of mind," he said.

I pursed my lips. He didn't really know me any better than I knew him, I reminded myself. And beyond his distrust, keeping him close to his 'safety of mind' seemed important. I didn't want him throwing anyone else around, destroying any more rooms, or just terrorizing people in general. Beyond that, I had to admit I was intrigued by this stronger version of the Pattern, and he'd probably noticed the way my eyes lit up when it grew brighter.

"All right, fine." I sighed. "So maybe we should trump Auric, since he's still there, instead of walking all the way back. I need to conserve all the energy I can. Wouldn't that be a good idea?" I asked smartly. Looking back, this was usually the limit of his dealing with my sarcasm, but perhaps he understood my stress, because he let it pass and agreed.

Auric did this for us, and the room was bright. I turned to find Ian on the Pattern. He was very, very bright. He was nearing the third veil, and surrounded by sparks going higher than Father had described, but up to his knees it looked to be more than sparks. It was simply bright, white light. I looked at Joss.

"Did you get the key?" I asked.

"No," she said lamely. I slapped the wall and growled. Then I laid my forehead against the cool stone.

"Stop that," Auric said quietly. I looked at him.

"No. I need the door open to walk it. Because," and I motioned to the Pattern and Ian's brightly glowing form behind me, "I'm not playing

this game." I pounded the wall again. "Great. I am ready to do this. I have the energy to do this. I have the will to do this. I am ready to walk the Pattern. I need to do it," I told the wall.

I turned around to watch Ian, trying to think of how to get the key. "He seems to be doing better than Andrew did," I noted. He was into the third veil, and I could just determine where he was. He was scarcely moving. The light flared so high and bright, it lit the entire ceiling, covered deeply in stalactites.

"If there was a big earthquake we would be screwed, wouldn't we?" I asked.

"I wouldn't worry about it too much," Auric said.

"Of course you wouldn't worry about it. You're not about to walk it, Auric." I laughed. "Gods... That's not normal, is it?" I pointed to Ian.

"What, the light? It is usually not this bright or high," Auric considered. "You should pay close attention to his walk."

"Oh, this is helpful," I muttered. I looked into his eyes. "I think I would have done better without watching."

"You'd best understand how difficult this is."

"I understood it was difficult," I told him. "I've been well prepared." We looked back to Ian, who was out there somewhere. The light was too bright to discern him anymore. Minutes passed. I still had not figured out how I could get the key, aside from waiting and asking.

The light dissipated to reveal Dworkin in the center with Ian. Joss gasped. I swore loudly, and moved close to Father. Ian had his sword up between them. They spoke briefly, and Ian lowered his sword.

"Ian, the key?" I yelled, then cleared my throat for a louder try. "Ian... the key?" He and Dworkin both looked over at me. "Please." I held my hands out. "Please," I pleaded.

"Give it back to me, Julian," Ian said, and made an impressive toss to father. I sighed in relief.

He and Dworkin disappeared.

I said to father, "Now we just have to get it unlocked."

"Yes," he said grimly. He started to approach Auric, but my brother put his hand up to hold him back.

"I'm getting a trump call," he explained.

"If it's Dworkin, tell him to go away," I teased.

"Andrew," he said in greeting. "Joss? Yes, she's here... She doesn't know how to tell who it is... Would you like to be here with us?... The Pattern Room..." He laughed. "I will let her know you would like to call her, or would you like her to call you?... All right, if you don't mind me being there..." Auric held out his hand to Joss. She took it.

"What?" she asked. Whatever the answer was made Auric laugh. "Well yeah..." he said, "stay out of my mind... where are you?... Okay, um, shit..."

"Do you want to go talk with him?" Auric offered to Joss. "I'll call you if Jenna decides she wants to walk the Pattern."

"Sure...if I take the key with me I'll be on the outside..." Joss began, but Auric interrupted her.

"Well, I was going to go to the guard station and walk back from there," he explained. She saw the wisdom in this and thought to Andrew she went.

Father tossed Auric the key. I moved over to speak with my brother. "Before you go, Auric, I don't want Joss to come back. Don't trump her."

"Then she will be mad at me," he said. I took a deep breath at this self-serving cowardice and told him to tell her I said so. "I will tell her you did not want an audience," he conceded.

"As I have not, from the beginning," I added.

"You should have told me. I would have helped you, step by step. I would have shown you everything I know," he whispered. I could feel his warmth close to me in the cool chamber.

I looked down, and whispered back, "I wasn't going to tell anyone."

He took my hand. "I know," was all he said. I squeezed his hand and looked back up at him.

"And all things considered, I still think I would have been okay. Except for closing the door behind me. Of course, I couldn't actually open the door, so that would have been a problem." I laughed softly.

"It's so much stronger with the door shut," he worried.

"If Ian can do it, I can do it. Not that I'd want to do it that way; especially the first time," I lied.

"You know, if you were to die on the Pattern, Father would find a

way to blame me," he said.

"Quit whining," I admonished. I shook my head. "No, you can't be serious."

"He would." He sounded so sincere I wanted to hold him.

"No," I looked in his eyes, "he wouldn't. He'd find some way to blame himself." I smiled sadly. If I could give him the basic understanding of Father I have, it'd be worth more than a thousand trumps to him. "Please, get this door open for me, brother." I slowly let go of his hand. He flipped to a card he'd had of the station at the stairs' end. He nodded to Father before going through the trump. If Father found anything strange about our exchange, he said nothing, but I could feel he'd been watching the whole thing.

I spent fifteen minutes in meditation before Auric unlocked the door. I had gotten myself back to where I wanted to be, mentally. I took off my earrings and necklace, and handed those to Father. I did not like the idea of metal against my bare skin. Of course, I kept my dagger, in case Dworkin showed up in the center.

I walked over to the beginning, took a deep breath, and stepped on, barefoot. There was a slight tingling in my feet. The force of the earth seemed to increase a bit. Father had done a good job describing it, considering the limits of words. The sparks rose slowly. I could see why it was so important to concentrate. The sparks were beautiful and unpredictable. Following the path was my first priority, so I wasn't able to watch them from inception to death.

I started to feel confident as the resistance increased. This was not so bad. Of course, I had yet to hit the first veil.

When I got to it, I suddenly found myself under quick pressure. Moving forward was an effort, but I had the goal. The onslaught of information came with the shift in difficulty. It really was everything. I could smell things I've never smelled, and recognized much I had. I was seeing so much, but I had to let it go through me, or falter. Most distracting were the things I could feel... a scratch... a spider walking down my leg... but I kept moving. The images I could most remember later were mostly of Mother: her with a baby, her on a ziggurat in the jungle surrounded by worshippers. It was the

most amazing experience, not for what I could remember later, but for what I couldn't. Still, it was there. Everything. All history, all experience, all life.

At the time, though, I could not focus on that. I kept moving. I saw Auric playing with his mother. I let that go by, with some difficulty. I saw Mother, completely out of her fashion, arguing with father in Amber castle. I felt something wet and sticky splash over me, and I denied it in my mind. Of course, that didn't work. I had to accept it and go on.

I broke through the first veil with a grin, and pushed forward with determination. The sparks increased, making it to my belt before the second veil. I avoided wrong turnings and stayed on the path, even as it became more difficult to see through the dancing sparks.

The second veil was much worse than the first. I drew on my inner strength for energy. The images hit me right away. This time it seemed I was seeing current events. It was much harder not to be distracted. Andrew and Joss in catacombs. Mother in casts, but I had seen her without them at the party, but no... then she was in shadow, no, that was Aunt Fiona. Rein in his bed, sleeping, right there. I pushed the last away, refusing the distraction and emotion. I got the impression of Father's pride, and worry, and concern. For the first time I understood the difference between the latter two. I felt much the same from Auric, and was buoyed. Then this utterly undeniable scent that I recognized as Rein's...

I broke through. I had no time for smiles now. I was focused, and I needed to be. I was tired. I felt as if I'd been doing this for hours, or days... I was so tired. But I did not want to die. As much as I needed to rest, I wanted to finish my task. I wanted to say forgotten things, and remember things which needed saying.

The sparks reached my shoulders. I refused to think about what my hair was doing. I kept putting one foot in front of the other, so tired, knowing the tight curves before the third veil were coming, even though I could not see them.

I really wanted to rest, but pure stubbornness kept me moving. 'Stop and die,' I kept telling myself. Knowing Auric could pull me off produced a barrier, but Father knocked it right down. I would not be weak, like Andrew had been. I had things to prove here, to myself and to Father. All I had to do was keep moving. The answers would come.

I made the turns. It could have been worse, and then it was. I hit the third veil and remembered the last two fondly.

I was seeing the death of everything. It was worse than my most horrid nightmares. I could smell death. It was everywhere. I let it go by, with some effort. The path. The goal. The images were gruesome. I was almost distracted by tears as Father wept over Mother's body, but I could still see the sparks. I had to keep moving, even knowing what her loss would cost me.

My questions had been simple. Most important to me was finding the best way to protect Mother and myself. The pattern gave me an answer I did not like. There was I, laughing maniacally over scores of dead bodies... bodies I'd killed, heads half missing and limbs bent wrong; Auric's body closest to me without his head. No one could hurt you if everyone was dead.

I'd wanted to know where Random was, and now I saw he was dead. Not only did he no longer exist, but somehow he never had, and because of that, all of reality is unraveling. And as my mind rebelled against these answers I had a vision of Dworkin saying, "Oh, you just talk to people." That would be the answer to how to break these bindings he'd put on me. Like I hadn't already tried just talking.

With a final step, I was in the center. I was determined to stay on my feet, though my legs were shaky. Most of me was shaky, and I took deep breaths to calm down.

"Okay," I said to myself, shoving everything else away and remembering why I was there, "just talk. Okay. It's not Eric, he only has mental energy and physical energy, but Joss has been told if she gives him life energy it will be Eric and she..." I smiled. "I'm saying it!" I said, and looked at Father. He pointed upward.

"I can't go up there because I'll have to go see Mother and sleep," I said. Auric pointed to his deck, and said, "I have my trumps." I nodded, not understanding. I was so tired. Father nodded at Auric and pointed up again. I sighed. "Meet me up there," I told them. I closed my eyes. Somewhat like how a trump works, Father had said. I pictured my rooms in the castle, and I told it, "Take me to my rooms in this castle." I opened my eyes and I was there, in my messy room.

I headed out the door to find Mother. I'd sent her that note, and knew she'd worry. I hadn't wanted her to watch, just in case, but she did deserve to know right off that I'd succeeded. My energy was depleted though, so father and Auric caught up with me at mother's hall. I waved. Auric smiled and jogged over. Father just took big steps.

"Where are you headed?" Father asked.

"To see Mother," I told him. They fell in, slowing down to my pace. Auric put his arm around my waist, giving me the chance to share the load. "That's not necessary," I said stubbornly. He just smiled down at me knowingly. "If you insist, Auric," I conceded, and leaned on him a bit. I was tired. Damn pride anyway. He grinned even more. We arrived. Father opened the door and walked in. I hesitated, and Auric stopped with me. I'd frozen in terror of finding her dead. But there I could see her from the door, in bed, casts still on, breakfast tray beside her. I smiled with a big sigh and walked in, assisted as I was.

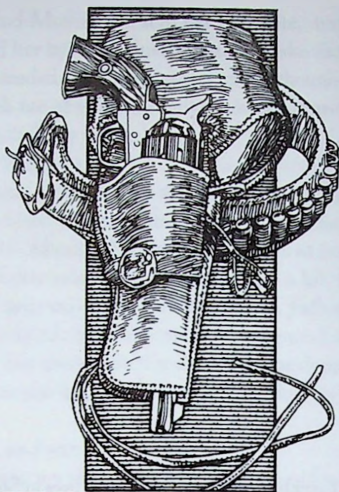
"Okay, I did it!" I boasted, and went over to her.

"Auric," she greeted, ignoring my rudeness. I swear, fire could be falling from the sky and she'd demand everything follow its proper course. He returned salutations, and offered to get drinks. I refused and sat down on the cot. "You look frazzled dear," she noted smartly. I grinned and hugged her.

"I did it," I told her, and fell asleep right there.

Elizabeth S. Ray Trumitch lives in Southeastern Michigan with her husband of eight years, Jeff, and six-year-old daughter, Fiona. When she isn't at work, playing with Fiona, or running her own small business she enjoys regency dancing, reading, acting, sewing, gardening and making poor Jeff insane with her latest project. Last book read: *The Once and Future King*. Next Book: *House Harkonnen*. To relax: playing bongos, hot baths, solitaire and listening to Fi read out loud. More on Liz available at: <http://www.geocities.com/tirdreams/lizhome.html>.

Juli Halbur-Herrera is an art slut. Or, if you prefer, Juli is a freelance illustrator. She has been writing and drawing since the tender age of five. She has been published in "Fractures of Rhyme" a horror-themed anthology of illustrated nursery rhymes. She also created the serpent used as the cover art for Ambercon 8's pre-registration booklet. She is currently one-third of Gozerian Press (www.gozerian.com), a startup publishing company producing role-playing games and supplements. She lives in Lakewood, Colorado with her husband Rey and son Tristan. She cites Jim Fitzpatrick, Alphonse Mucha, Arthur Adams and Terry Austin as her major artistic influences. Her online gallery is located at <http://littlekali.tripod.com/gallery.html> and she can be reached at juli@gozerian.com



THE DEVIL YOU DON'T

by Sarah Bear Kindred

Princess Muire is a character from Brian Roger's "Primus" game, which explores the possibility of an Amberverse created by Llewella forging her own Pattern and becoming a Dworkin-like figure. Muire is Llewella's granddaughter, child of her only surviving son, the King. She is the Warden of the Pattern, and, as one might imagine, a powerful Patternmaster. She also fancies herself something of a warrior and an artist, however, and this story explores some events that transpired during a period when she resolved to live by her wits for a time.

The plot and many of the character names are drawn from a series of old blues tunes, including 'Duncan and Brady' and, of course, 'Stagger Lee.'

His wide-brimmed hat cast his face into a darkness that the slanting sun could not relieve, and his worn grey poncho — which might have been black once — hung on a big, spare frame. His shadow stretched out behind him, spreading ragged black wings across the earth over which he traveled. He was mounted on a pale dappled horse, which trudged along the road, raising yellow puffs of dust: perfectly round and tasting of fear. No one stepped into the street to meet him, and a curious hush seemed to descend over the little town that squatted on the edge of the desert like a lizard on a rock.

I didn't go out to meet him, either: I was already walking down Main Street in my severe rust-and-grey dress, an open parasol shading my head in addition to my sun hat, my blued-steel, ivory-handled revolver strapped to my hip and a derringer tucked into my corset. As was my habit every Sunday, I was on my way to dinner at the Ivory Dog.

I had been living in Pitch Creek for two years, then, and had gained something of a reputation with the locals. My house was a half-mile west of town, an easy quarter-hour's stroll. It had grey weathered sides that had been whitewashed once and might someday be again, with thick walls and a sod roof to keep off the stultifying heat.

Maura MacAran was the name I was using, a joke that amused me. If any of my brethren happened through and heard the name, it might give such a one enough pause to look me up — not that I was sure I desired to be found. And the Irish and Scots had a reputation for being a bit fey, which excused my foreign ways.

The stranger's gaze swept over me without pausing. His eyes were burning turquoise, his nose gaunt and broken. I didn't think he'd miss much, but I was on the right-hand side of the street, and the bustle of my skirt hid the gun hung on my left hip. The clothing a woman had to wear here was awkward, but the opportunities made up for it. I was a schoolteacher and a doctor, and the restlessness of my penance and shame only chewed my heels a little here, and that only deep in the night.

I turned sideways and slipped into the saloon, as if disconcerted by his gaze. There was something about it, indeed, that disturbed me: something about he and his horse the color of desert sand and salt flats. I could feel him appraise and dismiss me: small, drab, inconsequential. It did not distress me to be underestimated.

Duncan behind the bar glanced up at me and smiled across the room. There were half-a-dozen customers, including old John Jeremiah Kale, the cattleman, in the room, but he managed a grin only for me. He was a big man, Miles Duncan, with flaming red hair, missing two fingers on his left hand and one on his right. He used to be a railwayman, a switcher. When the cars claimed his dexterity, he took to tending bar, and he kept a ten gauge under it and his old fiddle hung up on the wall behind.

"Evening, Miss Maura," he greeted me in his slow, endless drawl. The trembling of his hand as he slid my whiskey across the bar betrayed his nervousness, as did a quick flicker of desert-sky eyes toward the door. "Booth in the back?"

"If you please, Duncan." As I slipped around the corner of the bar and picked up my drink, I murmured soft enough that just he and Kale could hear me, "Trouble brewing?"

Kale shrugged, tipped his bottle and then set it back. "Question of the devil you know and the devil you don't," he answered, just as soft.

"Where's Brady?" I asked him. Marlowe Brady was Pitch Creek's sheriff: drunken, violent and ineffectual. Rumor had it he beat his wife, who was the mayor's daughter, but the mayor didn't seem to care and Brady had a shining star, so there wasn't a hell of a lot to be done about it. Well, perhaps I could have done something, but in the time since the Light failed, I've learned a few things. One of which is that Evil persists in all the worlds, and another is that even my kind can grow tired, in time.

Kale snorted into his watered liquor. "Passed out under a cot in his jail, no doubt. He was on a two-day bender as of Friday evening, and I didn't see him in church this morning."

"Liz Brady was there," Duncan offered. Liz never missed a sermon. I nodded and would have replied, but there was a heavy step on the creaking wood porch and Kale's head hunkered down over his shoulders again in the posture of an indifferent drunk. Both hands curled loosely around his squat glass as though he cradled something precious. I ducked into that dark booth that Duncan had mentioned and watched the entrance in the bartender's looking glass.

The stranger had pulled the bandanna down off his face, and his nose was even more broken than it had seemed on the street. White lines of scars

bisected it in two places, standing out stark against the sun-leathered brown of his skin. His left cheekbone had also been shattered long ago, and his face was not symmetrical. His eyebrows were grey, as was what hair poked out from under his dust-covered Stetson. He frowned — no, he sneered at the world with lips that betrayed a certain sensuality, arrogance, and old pain.

There was silence as he surveyed the Dog from the doorway, and then the click of his boots as he stepped in. His spurs made a little sound as he walked, reminding me of the sound made by a rattlesnake, or dried leaves blowing across stone. His step was light and sure although he walked with the heavy trace of a limp. I stifled a familiar sensation below my breastbone, a rising answer to his purpose as the power of the Pattern within me sought to flare in response. He had come in the name of vengeance. He had come to destroy.

A rush of lavender scent and musk, the rustle of satin and lace. Susie intercepted him five steps into the room. Her locks were gold, her looks were free, and if a superabundance of makeup and care made her look older than her

twenty-two years, that was the price of her profession. Her dress was deep scarlet today, and she moved with surprising grace for its weight and her heels. Duncan was sweet on her, but Susie said she'd rather whore any day than ever rely on another man's kindness again.

"Hey there, stranger," she cooed, "Buy a girl a drink?" She laid one manicured hand on his arm as he glanced down at her. Susie was not a little woman, but this stranger was one long drink of water. His grimace deepened, and he shook his head.

"You ain't the lady I was looking for," he muttered. His voice ran over me like charged fluid: the voice of my brother. It was all I could



do to keep my seat, and not rise and spin and cry his name. *It's not Shaw*, I calmed myself. *It's not Shaw's face. It's a shadow only...*

I studied that ruined old face in the looking glass, trying to convince myself, and found his reflected eyes meeting mine with a puzzled expression, as though trying to recall where he'd seen me before. He must have seen my head jerk up and my body shudder when he spoke. I was grateful for the shadows of the booth.

Duncan's help, Millie, brought me over my chicken and biscuits a moment later, and the stranger's eyes moved from the mirror to Miles Duncan. He stepped forward, brushing past Susie as if she wasn't there. "You the proprietor?" he asked Duncan, meeting the bigger man's eyes. Duncan nodded, and men cleared out from between the two of them.

"Miles Duncan," Duncan told him, his thick lips twitching just a bit. "What can I get you?" The stranger nodded, as if Duncan had asked him his name. "They call me Stagolee. And I'll have what the little lady in the corner is having."

He means me, I realized, feeling the weight of his eyes in the mirror again. *Stagolee*. The name nagged at me until I remembered where I'd heard it before. An old ballad, in another place, in a different time, about a bad man by that name, who gunned down a lady's lover and was slain by the lady in turn.

A thousand years ago, in another world.

He did not, to my relief, sit down beside me. I picked at my meal in silence as he sat at the bar and nursed one whiskey and ate and ate some more. When I could no longer stomach staring at my plate, I got up to leave, almost forgetting my parasol. There was no way out but past him, and when I stepped out of the booth he knew about the pistol. His gaze was cool, appraising. I left without looking back.

The night came on with the usual thunderstorm: almost no rain, savage heat lightning. I lay awake in my bed, the image of Shaw's ruined face before my eyes, and I wondered what had come before, and what might happen next.

The knock came before sunrise. I opened the door on it carelessly, inured by years of peaceful living, expecting a frantic mother or husband who

would drag me into the night with my little black bag in hand, to the sound of my red mare's grumpy snorts and stamps. I was not expecting the specter who stood just outside in the night, drizzle splattering off his hat and onto my porch, his gun already in his hand. He pointed it at my midsection and smiled. "Miss MacAran," he whispered, "I do hope you won't mind if I come in."

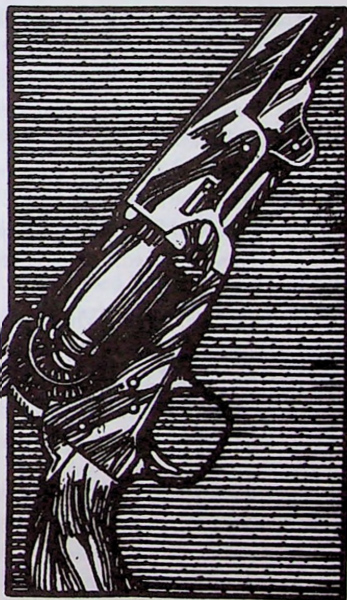
I nodded and backed up a step, feeling my skin itch as it tried to crawl out of the path of a potential bullet. I don't enjoy having guns pointed at me, immortal or not, and experience has not improved the sensation. He held the weapon with familiar ease, and I did as I was told. "Come on in then, Mister Stagolee."

He grimaced and dripped on my rug. "Not Mister," he answered. I turned my back on him, praying that he wouldn't shoot a woman in a nightgown in the back, trying to look small and slack and harmless. "You're the doctor in this pissant town."

I nodded. "And the schoolmistress." I took two steps forward, did not hear him following, glanced back. He was right behind me, and I suppressed a shudder. His spurs hadn't even jangled. "Can I take you into the parlor? Get you a cup of tea or a drink? You must be wet through..."

His laugh was a cold, flat, bitter thing, like burned coffee. "Please yourself, Miss MacAran. I just want a few answers."

I entered the parlor and sat, and he and the gun followed me. I moved fairly quickly, and he never complained, and the barrel of the revolver never wavered. Worse and worse. I try to keep my own expression



pleasant, but felt it sliding toward a frown. *This is not Shaw. Shaw is dead. This is simply someone very much like him, as is bound to be reflected in infinite worlds, infinite time.*

"What are the questions, Stagolee?"

I had chosen a hard, straight-backed chair. The one facing it was deeper and softer, difficult to get out of. He defeated my purpose by sitting on the edge of the desk. Damn and damn him.

His lips writhed into something that might be a smile. "I'm looking for a woman named Elizabeth Browning." He hesitated. "At least, that was her name. She married a man named Marlowe Brady." The gun never shivered. I felt its point of aim like a pressure, a slow, unwelcome caress.

"He's the sheriff in this town. What's your interest in Liz?"

That cruel, crooked smile crept an inch wider. "Suppose I tell you? What do you care? You're awful brave, for a lady with a revolver pointed at her belly."

"This is not the first time I've had a gun pointed at me," I mentioned casually. I was searching his eyes for any sign of recognition, finding only that confused familiarity.

He nodded. "I imagine not. No tears or hysterics, and you carry that Colt of yours like you know how to use it. You haven't got it now, though, and no fast draw in the world could save you if you did."

"I know." I sighed, and forced myself to sit back. "What do you want to know about Liz?"

It took five minutes. When it was over, he had me stand and turn to face the wall. I heard the click of the hammer being cocked, and braced myself to drop, spin, and kick. His breathing stopped, and I began to move...

Only to find myself facing an empty room.

I put my gun under my pillow and went back to bed.

I was up before sunrise, and I did not put on a dress. I dressed in jeans and flannel shirt like any man, high boots on my small feet. I had my red mare, Rowan, saddled before my bad-tempered brown and gold cock crew.

As my housekeeper walked up to my door I bid her good day and rode off toward town.

Rowan was feeling her oats, or perhaps it was the tension in me that made her prance. The earth showed no dampness from the night's drizzle, the early mist burning off without a trace as I rode. It was shaping up to be another suffocating day, and the restive mare between my legs did nothing to reassure me. There was a prickle of anticipation in the air. I checked my gun twice, and stopped outside of town to chamber a sixth and final round.

Duncan was sweeping the porch of the Dog. He glanced up grimly as I hitched Rowan out front. "You usually walk."

"Today is different. What do you know about this Stagolee?"

He studied me intently for a moment. "Trousers suit you, Miss Maura. But this is no mess for you to be interfering in." He turned back to his broom, though the porch was twice swept already.

"He showed up on my doorstep last night with a gun, Miles," I said. "I want the story."

I'd never called him by his given name before, and he studied me. He grimaced then, and nodded, and leaned the broom up against the wall. "Come inside then. No sense standing out in the heat."

A hawk called over the desert as I followed him into the Dog. He sat me down, and poured us both black coffee settled with eggshell, and sat down across from me. "What did he want?"

I drank the coffee, all but boiling, bitter and good. "Liz Brady. If I've ever treated her for anything."

"And?"

"I haven't. So he left."

Miles Duncan picked up a spoon and turned it over. Fluid light caught in the bowl, and he held it there like a magician might. For a moment, my breath ached painfully homesick in my throat. "It's an old scandal, Miss Maura. It doesn't bear much repeating. Mayor Browning doesn't like to hear it told."

James Browning was a great tall bear of a man, with hair that had been

gold before it burned to ash and muttonchop sideburns. He was a widower in his late fifties, and if he wasn't any better than he should be, he didn't seem a lot worse, either. I cupped my mug in both hands and nodded encouragingly, but Duncan just sat for a long moment and stared up at the dust-covered old violin that hung on the wall above the looking glass behind the bar.

"I had the story from Bart Cashman," he said finally, "Who had the Dog before I did. It's a local legend, but it's not told much these days..."

"It was about thirty years ago, the first time Stagolee came into Pitch Creek. Mayor Browning was Sheriff Browning in those days, and he had a pretty young wife, and... Well, he had a pretty young wife, and that Stagolee was a handsome man, they say, and about a year after Stagolee came into town looking for work he and Celia Browning skipped town together, she leaving behind her husband and a newborn babe, he all his clothes in John Kale's bunkhouse, except what he had on his back.

"Browning was wild, and lit out after him... after them... like a madman. He came back two weeks later with a bullethole in his knee and his wife's body sewn into a canvas sack. Seems when the pursuit got to close, Stagolee shot her, took her jewelry, and ran." Duncan paused to finish his coffee. "So I'd say the sonofabitch has balls, walking back in here. I can't for the life of me imagine what he wants."

I remembered what Kale said to me, soft and low, and I found myself nodding. "I think I understand."

Duncan raised an eyebrow, but I shook my head. "I have to go talk to Brady."

Iknew Shaw. I knew him to be older, faster, wiser, more skillful and more honorable than I. I also knew that I had been tougher and smarter and a damn sight meaner, once upon a time. Now all I had to do was remember that Stagolee was not, could not be Shaw. Because otherwise I would expect him to react as Shaw would react, and that could be fatal. Shaw might have pointed a revolver at me, but Shaw was dead.

Yes, Shaw might have pointed a revolver at me. *Stagolee* might have pulled the trigger. Pausing in the street, I realized I could still smell him, in my mind: damp leather, horse sweat and gun oil. I realized also that I was afraid. I

shook my dust-colored hair back out of my eyes and walked into the jailhouse.

Marlowe Brady sat with his feet propped up on his desk, a half-penny Lone Rider serial with a lurid cover open on top of the shotgun propped across his knees. His lips moved as he read, but at least he was trying. His dark hair was greasy and unwashed, but his clothes were spotless and his silver star shone more like a moon, it was so brightly polished. He glanced up as I came in: he had the face of an English bulldog, and the shoulders to match.

"Afternoon, Miss Maura." There was a faint sneer in his voice, but he swung his feet down off the desk. I felt my spine stiffen: I had once been accustomed to a certain amount of respect.

"Afternoon, Sheriff."

I could feel his gaze traveling the length of my body, lingering at my crotch. I simply stared back at him, knowing how cold my grey eyes can get. "And what brings you here, little lady?"

I drew up a chair, because he had not asked me to sit. "I have a question for you, Sheriff. What was your wife's mother like?"

He began to start upright, and then forced himself to sit back in the chair. Deliberately, he turned his head and spat. His dark eyes swiveled back to me, and he grimaced. "She was a whore. Maybe I shouldn't say that in front of a lady..." *...but you ain't dressed like no lady, Ma'am.* "...and maybe I shouldn't speak ill of the dead, but she was a thief and a liar and a loose woman and she deserved what she got. Why the hell should I be telling you this?"

I smiled and stood, and turned back from the threshold to regard him. "Because Stagolee is back in town."

I left him sputtering. By the time he reached the doorway to stop me, I had slipped around the corner and was gone.

Stagolee might be better than I was. But Brady was a bully and a fool.

A big, big man with very little swagger, leaning only slightly on the walking stick he used to counter a left knee that would not bend, Mayor Browning sauntered up to me as I was climbing the stairs to the otherwise deserted porch of the Dog. He laid a heavy, paternal hand on my shoulder and smiled. "Aren't you all gussied up?" He stepped back a pace as I raised my eyes to his, letting a little of my native power show in them. "Evening, Ma'am."

"Evening, Mayor. What can I do for you tonight?"

"My son in law tells me you know something about this... Stagolee."
His mouth twisted as though the name tasted bad on his tongue.

"I've seen him in town," I offered. I could feel him searching my face for the lie.

Browning shook his head at last. "Liz isn't safe with him here," he told me. "That murdering son of a bitch is going to swing."

"He scares me," I said, quite, quite honestly. "I worry about what he's going to do." I heard a threat in his voice that might be more than he had intended me to hear, and his next words confirmed it. "You just be careful, little girl." He smiled, patted my shoulder once more. "And keep away from that Stagolee. He's been the death of women before." And he turned and stumped away, leaning on his cane, and I fought the urge to let my left hand fall to my gun. He tried to look fatherly and safe and stolid and slow. But the porch didn't creak under his footsteps, and he was two hundred fifty if he was a stone, and not more than twenty of that was where it should not be.

God damn.

The knees of Liz Brady's calico dress were dirty and she held a scrub brush in her right hand: she had been waxing the kitchen floor. The dress was too hot for the weather, though, and though she'd splashed her face at the kitchen pump when she heard my knock, she could not hide the redness of her eyes. She moved stiffly, as if her bones ached.

"Hi, Missus Brady. May I come in for a minute? It's sweltering out here..." My voice and face were as open and honest as I could make them. She hesitated, glanced over her shoulder. I stepped forward.

"I don't know, Miss MacAran. I'm awful busy..."

I lowered my voice. "Liz, let me in. Your husband's in town still. It will be safe for a moment." My candor shocked her, and she stepped back the quarter-inch necessary for me to bustle past her. She trailed me into her own kitchen forlorn as a shadow, and I looked from her to the half-waxed floor and thought about the oddity in the way she moved. Then I sat myself firmly down at the kitchen table and she hovered over me, wringing her hands on the handle of her brush. "Miss MacAran..."

"Liz, call me Maura," I interrupted. "And listen. You have to get out of this house, and do it now, before he kills you."

"He'd never hurt me," she began, and then she dropped the brush in terror as I surged across the floor toward her and caught her wrists in both hands. She screamed — in agony, not in fear — and tears welled up in her eyes. She glanced down then, the pain in her face replaced by awe and then terror as I stripped the long sleeves back from her arms with casual strength and a horrid rending of cloth.

Black, cracked scabs encircled her wrists almost completely, thicker and worse by the knobs of the slender, birdlike bones. The marks were laid over other, older scars, and I had seen enough prisoners in my long life to recognize the like.

She was not much bigger than I, and infinitely less strong. I thought of Brady's bulldog shoulders, and felt the blinding white current of my rage rise up in me.

"Not Stagolee," I told her. "Not Stagolee. Brady, Liz. And Browning too."

The sun ached on my head, despite the welcome shade of my hat. Liz lay hiding in the cool back room where Duncan kept his bed, three floors below, bandages seemingly all over her body. Duncan was sitting with her, and the Dog was shuttered and closed, just like the rest of Main Street.

I lay on my belly on the roof, a carbine and my revolver by my side, and waited for the short shadows to appear on the street below. I felt the sweat prickle out across my neck, lank strands of hair as pale as dust clinging to my forehead. My hat prevented sunstroke, but it did nothing to mitigate the stifling, arid heat. I stole a pull from my water bottle without raising my head. It tasted of leather and warm spit.

A horse stamped in the corral down the street, and there was a jingle of chains. I smelled my own sweat, oil and powder, horse manure, the midden out back of the Dog. A hawk called, far off, answered by another. Lovers or enemies: no way to tell from the sound of their cries. The tar on the roof under my hands was melting. I thought of the texture of things with no place on this world, in this time. Plasticine, plastic explosive, chewing gum. Sealing wax, rosin. No, rosin

belonged here.

Stagolee stepped into the street first, and my thumb moved with practiced strength on the safety of the carbine. He glanced around, but from where he was he never could have seen something that was not a breeze ruffle the white eyelet curtains in the half-open window of the upstairs bedroom of Miss Pamela's whorehouse.

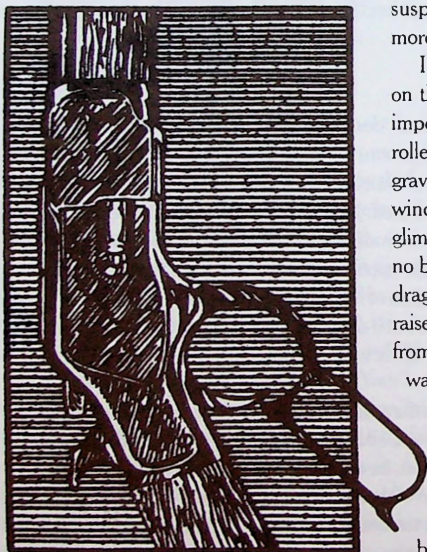
I did, however, and I saw as well the gleam of steel and a flash of ash-colored hair. My carbine roared and choked as, across the street, I heard the tigerlike cough of the rifle. The gun slammed into my shoulder, and a pane of glass starred and shattered. In the street, I heard Stagolee grunt and then curse, and another gunshot rang out of the first floor of the Ivory Dog. I was already moving when the shotgun roared its answer.

Perhaps the leap was superhuman: had I not been what I am, I would not have cared to try it. As it was, the three-story drop to the ground was jarring, but my knees took most of the shock of landing. I needed to keep moving,

suspecting that I hadn't done more than wing Browning.

I had abandoned the carbine on the roof: it would only have impeded me. I crouched and rolled with the landing, letting gravity take me to one side with a wind-breaking thud. I caught a glimpse of blood in the street, but no body. I gasped painfully as I dragged myself to my feet and raised one arm to protect my face from the shards of broken glass I was about to create.

The big window at the front of the bar had been broken before, but usually as a result of the forceful expulsion of a brawler. It exploded inward



quite satisfactorily, and I caught Marlowe Brady with most of my meager weight across the back of his neck. The gun skated out of his hand and across Duncan's polished pine floor, fetching up against the base of the upright piano with a musical thump, which was echoed by the sound of my elbow striking the back of Brady's head and Brady's forehead striking the floor. He fell quiet, and I rolled off him and around behind the bar.

The bullet had gone through Miles Duncan and broken the looking glass, and the blood had already slowed to a trickle, still pulsing weakly from the ragged wound in his side. I knelt in the puddles and spatters of it, and as I reached for him he shook his head and might have coughed, but he had no air in his lungs to do it with. His outstretched, maimed right hand lay inches from where the shotgun had fallen, after discharging its useless burden into the bar-room ceiling. It made an interesting tattoo, and would make a better story, one day.

"Miles..."

"Doesn't hurt," he mouthed, and then paused as if to gather breath and strength. He made a painful smile. "Miss Maura..."

"My fault, Miles..."

"No blame... Miss..."

I shook my head. "My name is Muire, Miles. Long story."

His hand clutched mine weakly. "Always knew... on the lam..." His face contorted as he struggled to breathe. "Last request, Muire?"

"Name it." My words had the force of a vow. "Bar goes to Liz..." I nodded, and he shook his head to say he wasn't finished. "And Susie. You take my fiddle."

"A treasure." I squeezed his hand, not caring now if he knew my strength. I let the light of my power come into my eyes, perhaps to comfort him. His eyes widened, though whether he saw me or Death I will never know.

"Scared." A long pause. "See you in hell..."

"You're going to heaven, Miles." I felt myself smile. "I know it for a fact."

"Never was a... churchgoing man..."

"Churchgoing's got nothing to do with it. They'll take you in or they'll have me to answer to." Surely I was not lying. Surely, if my power over the Pattern that binds the worlds means anything, souls like his are not lost forever

into the vacuum of the Abyss? He drew it in, what I knew would be his final breath, and expelled it with a silent tumble of words. I heard them anyway. "...angel? On the lam?"

There was blood on my hands as I closed his eyes, blood on my hands as I picked up his shotgun and stood, just in time to hear the click of a hammer being pulled back behind me. I tensed, and heard that soft, dangerously sharp voice cut through the smoke of death and gunpowder. "Don't worry, Miss MacAran. I know whose side you're on now."

I turned around slowly. Stagolee stood over Marlowe Brady, a booted foot on the unconscious man's back, a revolver in his right hand. He looked directly at me and smiled a crooked smile, showing three missing teeth on the ruined side of his face. Then he glanced back down at Brady and shot him once, neatly, in the back of the head.

My shock must have shown, because he grinned at me again and stepped around the sudden runnel of blood and brains that dribbled across the floor to mingle with Duncan's. I saw that Stagolee's left arm hung stupidly useless, and his own blood dripped from the fingers of that hand. "Browning," I said to him, and he nodded.

"Missed him," he answered. "Son of a whore."

"He killed her."

Stagolee pulled Duncan's apron from a hook behind the bar, laid his gun on the counter, and began to improvise a sling. After half a useless-one-handed minute, he looked at me with something that might have been pleading in another man. "What do you say, Doc?"

I bound his arm up while he remained silent, pouring himself a shot into an unbloodied glass and downing it with his other hand. Then he turned his head and spat, while I stared at him expectantly.

"Yeah, I guess he did." He looked at me straight, then, as I tested my knots. I felt his brutality in that sea-blue gaze, and I remembered how he had smiled as he killed the helpless sheriff. "And another thing."

I nodded. I already knew. "She's your little girl, isn't she?" The look he gave me then was so hopeless, so desolate, that I felt it like ice in my heart.

"She is not to know," he answered, pouring himself another drink. "Her momma deserved better men, and so does she."

I took the glass away from his and downed the whiskey myself. "She

knows. She figured it all out herself."

He looked at me, and his lip twitched. "Knew I was going to like you."

The last piece of the puzzle fell into place then, with a satisfying click. "Kale knew too. He called you in, didn't he?"

Stagolee just stared at me, eyes like chips of glass as he picked up the bottle and took three hard swallows. I watched the air bubble up in the bottle. He set it down with a click, wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

I set down the glass. "Browning's still out there. I think I tagged him."

Stagolee looked down at his gun. He fumbled it open, replaced the empty, clicked it shut. It made a satisfying sound, like a closing door. He nodded his shaggy, gaunt grey head. "Believe you did. Hard man to kill, though."

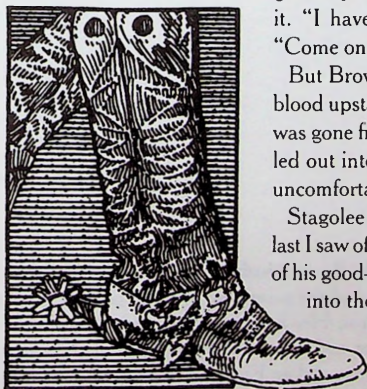
The back of his hand rubbed across his cheekbone as he said it, and as his hand concealed the ruined half of his face I looked into the face of my brother: weary, fallen, lost and broken, but once far more worthy than I. I wondered if it would not have been better, to lose immortality and memory both, rather than to continue on as I have, as I will. I smiled at him, and laid a hand on his arm. "Come on, Shaw. We've got a man to kill."

He reacted as if I'd poured whiskey down his throat when he was expecting iced tea. "Where did you hear that name?"

I held his gun out to him. He stared at it for a moment as if it had grown eyes and were staring back, but he took it. "I have the second sight," I told him. "Come on. Time's wasting."

But Browning was gone. There was some blood upstairs at Pamela's and his best horse was gone from the ranch house, and his track led out into the desert. It made me damned uncomfortable to know he was still out there.

Stagolee never came back into town. The last I saw of him, he was slumped in the saddle of his good-looking dappled dun horse, riding into the West with his shadow stretched



out before him. He went looking for Browning, and although he didn't want my company on the hunt, I need to believe that he found him.

The world needs a few more little justices like that.

Marked from an early age, **Sarah Bear Kindred** shares a birthday with Frodo and Bilbo Baggins and has had the occasional honor to publish under her nom de guerre of Elizabeth Bear. Her household includes one husband, four cats of varying levels of neuroses, and approximately three hundred pounds of dog divided between a Great Dane and an English Mastiff.



This issue...
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Wendi Strang-Frost
K. Michael Thomas
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